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**The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society -  
Sources, Trends and Processes**

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# **The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society Sources, Trends and Processes**

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## **Summary**

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, haredi, the Ultra-Orthodox society rose from the ash heaps of the Holocaust of European Jewry. The traditional-religious Jewry of Eastern and Central Europe -- Hassidim umbilically connected with their rebbes, and Misnagdim zealously guarding the tradition of their forebears -- has vanished from its former abode. It has been replaced by a haredi Jewry concentrated in Israel and in major Western European and American cities. The affinity of Judaism for the Eastern European tradition firmly anchored in its consciousness and in the basic values that distinguish it from other Orthodox religious identities. However, despite the great similarity between today's Haredim and the traditional-religious Jews of the past, haredi society is not a traditional society in the conventional sense of having an unconditional commitment to a living tradition that passes directly from father to son in a community that exacts individual and family obedience to local custom and punishes any deviation from it. True, the traditional Jewish society, in which the community determines the life norms for all of its members in view of allegiance to religious tradition, had died out in Eastern Europe in the period before the Holocaust. Most Jews, however, remained true to their faith, living the tradition transmitted directly to them from preceding generations in the form of socio-geographic views that expressed particular social-religious identities. This traditional form of Judaism no longer exists. Haredi Jewry today is a small, well-defined, discrete minority, organized in contiguous voluntary communities, set within a modern, open society with competition, confrontation, dependency, and interrelations with this surrounding society. However, in contrast to what one would expect, and contrary to historical experience before World War II, the move to the West and settlement in Israel amid a secular-Zionist majority not only failed to intensify the community's erosion, but, for the first time since the onset of secularization, led to an almost complete halt of this erosion and to unprecedented growth, even when compared with the golden ages of traditional Judaism. Haredi society today presents non-haredi Jewish society with a challenge. It views itself as an alternative to the Israeli secular-Zionist culture, and many of the adherents of this culture regard haredism as a

significant threat to its existence. This view of haredi society is based not only on its success in surviving and flourishing after the horrors of the Holocaust, but on its representing a counterculture that embodies the values of devotion to devotional study, modesty, family stability, personal responsibility, and mutual assistance. Haredi society feels that it has succeeded where Zionism failed -- in establishing an ideal society: ours is better than theirs: "we (the Haredim) are better than you (the secular Zionists)". Many Israelis are prepared to accept this statement as true.

What is the secret of this success? What does it mean for those in and outside the fold? What religious, social, and economic price does it entail?

The development of haredi society after World War II cannot be understood without understanding the period that preceded it, which, as stated, was rife with social, economic, and political crises, migration and displacement, that almost completely undermined the traditional social structure and led to an increasing drift away from religion and tradition. In this period, the ideational principles were set forth, the "hero" images shaped, and the cardinal myths of haredi society coalesced. Against a hostile, scoffing world, foundations were laid for the future haredi society, with the image of the yeshivot as all-inclusive monastic institutions whose task it was to tear the young Jew away from his parents' home and his traditional life setting and to turn him into a young master-scholar, wholly devoted to the ideals of Torah study and religious perfection, confronting not a living tradition but a tradition of books and the society of the yeshiva elite. The Volozhin-type yeshivot were the embryonic cells of the future haredi society, based not on family and community as the agents of socialization and transmission of traditional values, but on all-inclusive institutions detached from the surroundings and the economy. This development could not but have far-reaching significance. It was intended for the intellectual elite, which had declared a moratorium on its connection with economic affairs, i.e., for a small minority that had taken shelter behind defensive barriers. The cost of the late-19th-century yeshivot was, in that crisis-ridden time, far beyond the means of traditional-religious Jewry; these institutions could sustain themselves only with the assistance of the new Jewish communities in Western Europe and America, whose attachment to religion and tradition was waning.

In the realities of Eastern Europe, these embryonic cells of haredi society had no chance to develop and mature completely. The success of the yeshivot in ensuring their graduates' commitment to religion and halacha was only partial in those days, even though these graduates were relatively few in number. As it turned out, it was the very principle of absolute dedication to Torah study in the yeshiva setting, coupled with the rejection of general and vocational (instrumental) studies, that motivated a large proportion of the students to abandon these institutions. And it was in the West of all places, in a welfare society, that the Jews' integration into the Western economy and the improvement in their standard of living allowed haredi society to develop as a "society of scholars," based on the yeshivot as frameworks that prevented drift and ensured intergenerational continuity. Only in modern Western society could such a complex system of interrelations and dependence develop between a minority haredi society of scholars and the surrounding secular-Jewish and/or "modern Orthodox" society. The modern welfare society assumes responsibility for education, health, and income maintenance for everyone within it, thereby not only financing much of the education budget of the haredi society of scholars, but also freeing extensive resources of the haredi nuclear family for the direct and indirect expenses of the nascent society of scholars. On the other hand, the numerous employment opportunities, available to women in modern society, permitted haredi women to play a decisive role in the economic base of the society of scholars in the difficult transition stage from bachelorhood to marriage and the creation of the new haredi family unit, while ensuring that the husband remains in and depends on the institutional array of the haredi society of scholars. There are many other aspects to the interrelations of Haredi scholar-society and the surrounding non-haredi society, and the dependence of the former on the latter. However, two such aspects will suffice to demonstrate the complexity and variety of these relationships. Technological development and the constant improvement in standard of living have wrought a revolution in secondary and post-secondary education. New fields of employment are available to graduates of modern school systems. This has left the majority of religious jobs and services -- which are needed, to some extent, by the entire Jewish community -- in the hands of the graduates of haredi scholar-society institutions. Second, scientific and technological progress made it necessary to raise the standards of science study in the high schools. This caused the educational gap, between non-haredi youngsters in high schools and technical schools and haredi youngsters pursuing purely religious studies in yeshivot, to widen. This is a difficult gap to bridge at a later stage, especially since haredi young adults marry at a relatively

early age (20-24). The haredi youngster finds himself forced to remain in the scholar-society under almost any circumstances. Thus modern society "encourages" haredi youth to remain in the world in which they were raised and schooled.

This does not mean that haredi youth remain faithful to their society only because they are virtually unable to leave it. Certainly, haredi society presents its youngsters with a real alternative to hedonistic, permissive modern society -- an ideal of devotion to Torah study, mutual assistance, a clear sense of identity, and social security. This alone, however, cannot explain the almost complete staunching of the disaffection that swept Orthodox society in the West beginning in the 1950s, and the sweeping tide in the period preceding it.

The ideological price that haredi society was forced to pay for its success in establishing the society of scholars was an abandonment of the principle of separatism ("hitbadlut") vis-a-vis the secular Zionists. From the very beginning, this was only an incomplete and problematic solution to the dilemma that Orthodox society now faced. On the one hand, it could not recognize the right to existence of a Jewish entity not bound to Jewish law ("halacha"); on the other hand, it could not expel the heretics and Sabbath-desecrators from the Jewish nation. Separatism was proffered as a solution for those Jews who did not want to recognize the right of Zionism to establish a Jewish entity in Eretz Israel that did not recognize Jewish law as a fundamental, binding norm. This separatism was expressed above all in public political life, where it took the form of refusal to participate in the autonomous Jewish community system established under the British Mandate ("Knesset Israel") and the prohibition of accepting money from Zionist foundations.

The haredi society of scholars is based on an opposite principle -- interrelations and dependency. In the 1950s, the haredi rabbinical luminaries warned against accepting funds from the Zionist state to maintain the yeshivot. However, as the society of scholars grew and the new haredi culture flourished, it became clear that this society could not sustain itself without significant increases in allocations from the state exchequer. Moreover, the growth of the haredi society of scholars led to the virtually complete subordination of haredi politics to a single goal: securing economic support from the state. The principle of separatism was therefore dropped, and commitments to basic positions set forth by the

Council of Torah Sages in the early 1950s -- proscriptions against joining a coalition and assuming responsibility for the commissions or omissions of the secular Jewish state -- were breached. A deeper exploration of this situation shows that the very same extremists, adherents of the Eda haredit (Haredi Community) in Jerusalem, who profess their allegiance to the principle of separatism, who refuse to participate in Knesset or municipal elections, and who refuse to accept money from national or local government for their educational institutions, can survive only because the vast majority of the haredi public has abandoned the principle of separatism. Since most haredi institutions accept "Zionist" funds, the extremists are able to keep their institutions well financed. The Eda haredit is able to survive and flourish only because its institutions provide religious services to the general haredi public, most of whom do not practice separatism.

The haredi society of scholars has actually succeeded in achieving virtually complete social segregation of haredim from non-haredim as individuals. In practice, haredim are dissuaded from maintaining primary social relationships not only with secular Jews but even with non-haredi Orthodox Jews. The formation of a haredi ghetto leads to the ousting of such non-haredim who reside there. The strict dietary laws to which all members of haredi society are committed, do not permit reciprocal social relations around a common table with Orthodox Jews who are not haredim and do not require the special haredi dietary certification. The haredi leisure culture, which is sex-segregated, encumbers relations with non-haredim, since the latter have a non-segregated leisure culture. Briefly, the voluntary segregation of haredim from non-haredim is much stronger today than in the past.

However, the geographical and social insularity of haredi society, and the consequent nearly total cessation of the erosion from its ranks, cannot but create new problems that defy solution. The drift from religion and tradition was also a filtering process that left within the fold only the most suited, those who were prepared to make economic and social sacrifices in order to realize the religious ideals of haredi society. Now that the ranks have been closed and most exits from this society have been sealed, everyone -- including those who are ill-suited by temperament and personality, those unfit for devotional studies in yeshivot, and those of wavering faith -- to remain within the fold and undermine internal stability. The impact of this situation is already perceptible in some areas of the haredi ghetto, which finds it difficult to fulfill its role as an

enclave of sanctity amid the secular, hedonistic modern city.

The formation of the haredi society of scholars has transformed beyond recognition the traditional Jewish society from which it arose and blossomed. It has made the yeshiva the central fixture and brought the rabbis back to politics. These rabbis, however, are not the successors of the rabbis of the traditional Jewish community. They are "Torah luminaries" ("gdolim"), mainly heads of Volozhin-style yeshivot and hassidic rebbes. Their authority is not defined by their rabbinic ordination; nor do they have to answer to community leaders who are conscious of their power and authority. These luminaries have personal charisma; their learned religious opinion authorizes them to make decisions in all areas of life. Their students regard themselves as their emissaries. This process has completely transformed the political power structure of haredi society and the nature and image of the haredi political parties. It has led to the disappearance of the Poalei Agudath Israel (PAI) party and, ultimately, to the disintegration of Agudath Israel Youth (Zeirei Agudath Israel - ZAI) as well, who, paradoxically, were among the standard-bearers of the luminaries' leadership. However, the more far-reaching significance of the entrance of the luminaries into politics was the deterioration of the status of the Council of Torah Sages as an authority symbolizing the unity of the entire haredi camp. The traditional contrasts between Misnagdim and Hassidim, and among the hassidic courts, became more conspicuous as the haredi society of scholars became more entrenched and the economic implications of this development became clear. Instead of providing an inclusive leadership that could bridge the traditional gaps and the clashing economic interests, the luminaries have become increasingly identified with their own groups. Thus it has become even more difficult to arrive at solutions and compromises, and the Council of Torah Sages has found it harder to function. In the end, personal or partisan conflicts between the luminaries had a decisive impact on the political-religious rift in haredi society and to the revival of the controversy between Hassidim and Misnagdim.

The development of the haredi society of scholars within open modern society had another unexpected result: an undermining of the general "ecumenical" haredi identity and the ascent of particularism. If the development of modern communication media, migration from towns to large cities, and migration to the West, had initially weakened affinity for the particularistic traditional identity and fostered the coalescence of an



ecumenical haredi identity, blurring historical differences and disputes, the individual groups managed to reconstitute themselves in the West and re-establish their educational institutions -- yeshivot, kollelim, and girls' schools -- in which a particularist haredi identity took shape at the expense of the ecumenical haredi identity. Moreover, modern communication media, convenient transportation, and the revolution in international and intercontinental air travel not only failed to weaken the affiliations of individual hassidic groups and their commitment to their leadership, but actually strengthened them. Much more than in the past, convenient access to the "court," rapid communication with the rebbe, and the ability to educate the young in yeshivot affiliated with one's own group are responsible for keeping group members closely attached to and dependent on each other and on their leader, the rebbe, who symbolizes the singularity and identity that define each group as distinct from the others. The internal "borders" between patches of the haredi turf have become clearer and less traversable.

In view of all these developments, the problem of the interrelations and dependency of haredi society on the surrounding non-Haredi milieu comes up again and again. As stated, the success and flourishing of haredi society has depended on its development as a society of scholars, and this, in turn, depends on growing relations with and dependence on the non-haredi society. The stability of this situation depends on the economic capabilities of non-haredi society, its willingness to shoulder a growing portion of the cost of the society of scholars, and the ability of the economic structure to provide the graduates of the haredi society of scholars with jobs and services. However, the proportion of haredim in general society is changing rapidly due to the high haredi rate of natural increase (an average of six children per family). To obtain the necessary resources from the state, haredi society must attain political power. On the one hand, the natural increase contributes to haredi society's electoral clout; from this standpoint it is functionally beneficial to this society's social structure. On the other hand, it places the future of the society of scholars in doubt. Not only is the cost of maintaining the yeshivot and kollelim growing constantly and rapidly approaching the highest possible optimum, but the options for graduates of this society to obtain work or services after years of kollel study are diminishing. The occupational fields favored by many kollel graduates, such as provision of religious services, teaching jobs for men and women, and so on, are already saturated. These pressures are already causing internal tension in haredi society and are fueling the flames of

separatism and fractiousness among hassidic courts, between Hassidim and Misnagdim, and between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. These patterns show up first in politics. Agudath Israel, which used to represent the large majority of haredi society, has split into three parties: Agudath Israel, representing the major hassidic courts; Degel Hatorah, representing the "Lithuanian" yeshivot and the Belz Hassidim; and Shas, representing the haredi elite of Sephardi yeshiva and kollel students and masses of traditional Oriental Jews.

In view of the problems that beset haredi society, one cannot but ask: is the existence of a society of scholars that requires all its male members to study in yeshivot and to continue studying in kollelim for many years, to the exclusion of general or vocational education, viable in the long term? Will haredi society not be forced, in the near future, to be selective in admission of students to yeshivot, leaving the others with no choice but to take part, in some way, in the conventional Western socialization process? When this happens, will haredi society be able to maintain enough control over its graduates to ensure its continuity? Will this society be a haredi society?