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Split identity

The challenges of integrating the growing numbers of young haredim who are adopting a secular lifestyle

Between worlds

Until now, there has been little government support to aid the integration of the growing number of citizens leaving the haredi fold for a secular life. That is about to change



FOR 27-YEAR-OLD Shmuel Landan, the process of leaving the haredi world took seven years. 'Today my meaning is to make myself and others happy.'





SECULAR PATRONS at a Jerusalem cafe. 'Yotzim' have a difficult time adjusting to life outside the religious framework. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Brought up without a secular education, many 'yotzim' lack basic job skills



MK ADI KOL: When I met the yotzim, I realized how secluded and alone they are.

• Text and photos: YARDENA SCHWARTZ

At first glance, Haim is your typical young Israeli guy. Fit, tan, about to finish his army service and looking forward to backpacking through Asia or South America, the 22-year-old smokes cigarettes while sipping a cappuccino at a Tel Aviv café. Later that night, he'll meet up with friends, maybe go out for drinks.

Unlike his present, Haim's past is far from average.

Haim grew up in a family of nine children in Bnei Brak. He studied in yeshiva until the age of 19, when he realized that he didn't believe in the life he was living, and decided to leave.

"When you're haredi, everyone is the same. You can't be yourself, and I wanted to be free," says Haim, who has requested that his last name not be used so as to retain some anonymity. "I started to realize that I'm not going to see the world, I'm not going to be me. It was killing me. But in the beginning I killed that thought because I knew there was nothing I could do about it. Night after night I kept having these thoughts, and I finally decided that I didn't want to be there anymore."

Haim's transformation didn't happen overnight. It was a process of shedding layers. First he started working. Then he stopped praying. After that came dressing differently, not wearing a black hat, not wearing tzitzit, wearing more secular clothing.

His haredi parents were furious. They yelled at him, asked him what he was thinking. They stopped short of kicking him out of the house, because they didn't have to.

"Sometimes a man doesn't need to say anything. You see his face and it tells you everything. That's how it was with my mother," he says of the last night he spent in his family's home. "The way she looked at me, there was nothing more to say. There is nothing worse in the world. It was like she was looking at the most hated man. The look you give a man who raped someone. At that point I said to myself, I'll never go back."

That was nearly four years ago. He hasn't seen or spoken to his family since.

ONCE A rarity in the country's sheltered and highly isolated haredi community, Haim's story represents a subculture that has been growing within Israeli society for several years: young men and women who choose to leave the haredi world, often losing their families in the process.

Though Israelis refer to them as "hozrim beshe'ela" (returning with a question – a pun on *hozrim b'teshuva*, the term for newly observant Jews, which can be translated literally as "returning with an answer"), they call themselves "yotzim beshe'ela" – leaving, rather than returning.

As the number of haredim in Israel grows exponentially, the number of yotzim beshe'ela is growing with it. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, there are approximately 12,500 men and women between the ages of 20 and 40 who have left the country's haredi community – becoming slightly less religious, traditional, secular, or renouncing God altogether. In the last year alone, according to government figures, at least 1,300 Israelis left the haredi world, and that figure is expected to grow.

While the issue of haredim and their role in society has sparked countless debates, protests and headlines, the issue of ex-haredim has largely gone untouched. Perhaps that's because haredim represent a much larger portion of the Israeli population – approximately 10 percent, or 800,000.

Those who leave the haredi community face many of the same educational and employment problems that those who are still in the community face. Brought up without a secular education, many lack basic job skills, yet yotzim receive none of the generous financial support that the government has given haredim for decades.

Until now, the government has never provided any support, financial or otherwise, to the swelling number of yotzim beshe'ela. But for the first time in the country's history, that is about to change.

Leading the effort is MK Adi Kol (Yesh Atid), who chairs the Knesset Public Petitions Committee. This past November, she says, she started to receive troubling calls and letters from young men and women who had left the haredi world. Some of them pointed out that over the past two years seven yotzim had committed suicide.

"They said, 'We are lost. We have no workable skills, our families are not in touch with us, we have no community to be a part of.' I think they are the most detached group I've ever seen," says Kol, a lawyer who, prior to joining the Knesset last year, worked with underprivileged populations such as ex-drug addicts >>>



YESHIVA STUDENTS walk in Jerusalem's Old City. According to Landman, 'when you're haredi you have plenty of support – from you family, your community, your government. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Many young men who leave the haredi world end up doing army service, even though they have often been brought up to despise it



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and battered women.

"When I met the yotzim, I realized how secluded and alone they are," she says. "I was overwhelmed by all of the problems they presented."

One major struggle is the initial fear of leaving such an isolated community and entering a new world about which they know little, one that many have been taught to view as a place for sinners and criminals.

For 27-year-old Shmuel Lamdan, the process of leaving the haredi world took a full seven years.

"It took many years to gather all my courage to do the one thing I knew I had to do all that time," says Lamdan, who grew up in the ultra-Orthodox Negev community of Netivot. One of nine children, he left his home at the age of 24 and moved to Ramat Gan. "I only stayed because I felt ashamed. I felt guilty."

After yotzim take the leap that both Haim and Lamdan took, the next struggle is finding a new home, a new community. When Kol met with yotzim, she realized that providing a bridge was the first thing the government needed to do to help this vulnerable population.

"Once you decide to leave – where do you go? What do you do? Who do you call?" she asks. "There's no place to go. So my main goal was to start a center like a youth center – similar to a battered women's center, where it's confidential."

Her first step was to form a new lobby in the Knesset, the Lobby for People Who Leave the Ultra-Orthodox World, which she chairs. Then she approached Finance Minister and Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid to ask for funding. Lapid, whose election campaign hinged on the idea of a "shared burden" for haredim, granted Kol NIS 6 million – a small sum compared to the hundreds of millions of shekels the government allots to the haredi community, but a start.

Some of that funding will be spent immediately on the construction of crisis centers and safe houses throughout the country. According to Kol, these centers will function as "a place where someone can spend their first two or three months and figure out where to go from there. They'll have social workers, people who went through the same thing before, to help them figure out their next steps."

WHILE THEY come from different parts of the country, Lamdan and Haim both ended up in Ramat Gan after leaving their homes. Many other yotzim have moved there as well, after discovering Hillel, an NGO that has been the primary source of help for ex-haredim for more than 20 years. With offices in Jerusalem and Ramat Gan, Hillel has been the first stop for thousands of ex-haredim, who also call themselves "X-Dos," a play on the Hebrew slang word for haredim.

One form of support Hillel offers is affordable housing for those who have recently left their homes. Both Lamdan and Haim took advantage of that benefit, among many others.

On top of living assistance, Hillel offers counseling with volunteer social workers and psychologists, classes in job skills, and scholarships for university and for the *bagrut* (matriculation) and psychometric exams, which Israelis need in order to graduate high school and apply to university.

In ultra-Orthodox yeshivot, students do not learn the subjects necessary to pass these tests, nor are the tests administered at their schools. For many haredim, that may not be a problem, since their primary goal is studying Torah, not entering university or the job market. But for

ex-haredim who want to pursue higher education and a career, the lack of a basic secular education is a staggering obstacle.

Hillel's assistance has been valuable, but as a nonprofit organization consisting almost exclusively of volunteers and relying solely on donations, it can only go so far.

"We need more help than the haredim," says Lamdan, who attended a pre-university program and is now finishing his first year of university with the aid of Hillel. "When you're haredi you have plenty of support – from your family, your community, and the government."

According to Kol, the fact that the government has been providing employment and education assistance to haredim means it should do the same for yotzim.

"They require the same benefits from the government as the haredim, because they have the same problems," says the MK. "If you give the haredim the ability to finish their education and bagrut and university, then why not for yotzim? They lack basic skills, and we want them to study in the university, we want them to contribute to the economy."

So far, she says she has had total cooperation from the relevant ministries, such as the Welfare and Social Services, Education, and Construction and Housing ministries, as well as the army. In fact, she says, the IDF has been the most cooperative, as it is already treating yotzim as special cases by placing them in the Lone Soldier program. And many young men who leave the haredi world do end up serving in the army, even though they have often been brought up to despise it.

Haim, for example, felt a powerful urge to give back to the country once he left his haredi roots.

"So many people fought for me so that I could grow up and live," he says. "So I'm giving these three years to all the people who gave their three years to me."

After losing his own family with his decision to become secular, Haim gained an adoptive family through his service as a lone soldier. When he gets breaks from the army for weekends and holidays, he spends time with his new family on their kibbutz. Now, in his final months of service, the army is also helping him prepare for the bagrut, which he needs to pass in order to be considered a high-school graduate.

"I didn't graduate from high school because I learned in an ultra-Orthodox school," Haim explains. "They don't teach bagrut, just Torah and *Tanach* [Bible]. Now I'm studying math, Hebrew, civics and English. Once I pass the test, I'll get a certificate, and then I can work, because it will say that I graduated."

THE ONE minister who hasn't been cooperative in recognizing yotzim as a specific group in need of special assistance, says Kol, is Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, who leads the national-religious Bayit Yehudi Party.

Kol asked Bennett to grant ex-haredim access to the types of courses that the ministry is offering to haredim, such as training in technology and programming, and classes on how to apply for a job or write a resumé. In response, Bennett wrote her a letter stating that these classes were only for haredim.

According to Bennett's spokeswoman Shira Kaveh, "there is a budget for the haredim, and it's just for the haredim, because it's a new program. But there are budgets for other groups through the Economy Ministry for educa- ➤



Yael Harel, a volunteer at Hillel, a non-profit that has been serving the ex-haredim community since 1991, at its Ramat Gan office. She says the number of ex-haredim seeking the organization's services has quadrupled since she started working there nearly four years ago.

tional courses. For the haredim, it's a unique program, with NIS 500m. for five years. You can't give yotzim part of the budget to be part of the program for the haredim, but they have many ways of getting help from the Economy Ministry."

The ministry has no specific budget for ex-haredim, but for all other groups that do not include haredim, Kaveh said, the budget is "millions of shekels." Asked how many millions exactly, and what classes these other groups have access to, she was not sure. She did not respond to a follow-up message requesting further details.

Kol hopes to work something out with Bennett, but in the meantime there are other options. Given Hillel's trusted role and experience within the community of yotzim, the government's new funding will be administered in partnership with the nonprofit, enabling the organization to expand on the counseling, employment and educational assistance that it has been offering for the past two decades.

Yael Harel, who has been working at Hillel on a voluntary basis for nearly four years, is happy that the government is addressing the needs of ex-haredim, but she remains skeptical.

"It's about time the government starts taking responsibility for all of its citizens, not just the haredim," she says. "I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt, but until we actually see the money, I'm going

to be doubtful."

And in fact, the funding comes with strings attached: Hillel expects to receive NIS 2m. from the government for the coming year, but it's a matched donation program, so the organization must first raise NIS 2m. of its own.

Still, for Harel – and for the yotzim themselves – it's not so much the funding that matters, but the recognition.

"None of the money or the education is as important as giving us a place to meet and be together," says Lamdan. "The biggest thing is legitimization. Everything I'm doing is okay [here]. It was the opposite at home. Everything I was thinking was wrong."

Says Harel, "It's about finally recognizing that there is such a thing as yotzim. The country finally understands that this is a group of people who get no help, have been ripped apart from their families, and basically have no support. When you're a new olah who comes here from the US, you get funding, benefits, help with finding a job, an apartment. These kids are like new immigrants coming from another world, with no benefits from the government."

Before the current government, says Kol, help from the state for this population simply wasn't going to happen. First, the issue was completely under the radar, but it also had to do with haredi influence within previous governing coalitions.

"When the yotzim came to the Knesset

to talk about their problems a few months ago, they said they were afraid of coming before because of all the haredim in the government," says Kol. "There was actually one haredi at that meeting who tried to blow it up, by saying, 'This isn't a phenomenon, it doesn't exist.'"

In her opinion, efforts to prevent the government from helping this community stem from the fear that more young people will be encouraged to leave the haredi world, weakening Judaism in Israel. After all, many ex-haredim have gone from being strictly observant to not believing in God at all.

With the Internet and social media providing new windows into the secular world, and more haredim possibly serving in the army in the future, the drift from haredi to secular might be an unstoppable force.

"It's not that I want people to leave," says Kol. "I just want people to know that they have an option. I want people to be able to make these decisions. When a secular person decides to become haredi, the community takes them in, and I want it to be the other way around also."

One way she intends to help ex-haredim in their transition to mainstream Israeli society is by facilitating interaction through activities with their secular peers. She has already started the process with a small group she calls "students for dialogue," which meets for Shabbat dinners and in which she participates.

WHILE THOSE who have sought refuge at Hillel credit it with giving them the support they lacked and the acceptance for which they yearned, the group can also become a cocoon, replacing one isolated community with another.

Haim is now renting an apartment in Tel Aviv with three roommates, one of whom he met at Hillel, but he no longer goes to Hillel meetings and events.

"I don't go there anymore because a lot of people there are living in the past, and I think it's enough," he says. "I want to look to the future."

Lamdan, who lives with the girlfriend he met during his first month at Hillel, still goes there on a weekly basis for meetings, lectures, workshops and other events. He also volunteers his skills as an engineering student, fixing the organization's computer problems. Although it's been three years since he left his haredi life, he is still struggling to come to terms with his new identity, and finds comfort in being with other people who understand what he's been through.

"When I look at myself in the mirror, sometimes I hear negative voices in my head telling me this isn't who I'm supposed to be, because I'm supposed to have kids and learn Torah all day," he says. "But my life has more meaning now, because I'm actually thinking when I do things, not doing things just because I have to. Today my meaning is to make myself and others happy."

For more information on Hillel, go to <http://www.hillel.org.il/en/>.