

In Defense of the Haredi World

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Most of the time, the Haredi world get a really bad press. Extremism. Lack of social responsibility, religious coercion, dirty party politics, and corruption. Everywhere politics are so dishonest, so one-sided, so immaturely simplistic and aggressive. In my opinion there is a great deal in the Haredi world that deserves criticism, even condemnation. Even so, I think the Haredi world is getting a bad rap.

For example of the bad, there is a political battle going on in Israel over praying at the Western Wall. It is a turf battle, not a religious one. Chief Rabbi Amar has referred to non-Orthodox Jews as "cursed, and a people who do every injustice and immorality in the world". We are so few. Can we afford such divisive, childish talk? Is this serious leadership?

The right-wing Israeli news network [Arutz 7 reported that](#) rival gangs of yeshiva students were fighting each other over who controls a yeshiva:

"A long-standing quarrel in Bnei Brak's flagship Lithuanian-haredi Ponevezh Yeshiva exploded Saturday night, as a mass brawl erupted between rival factions in the dining room. Students threw chairs at each other, and sprayed each other with tear gas, causing tens of thousands of shekels worth of damage. Police arrested eight for their role in the violence."

And these are supposed to be our elite, our future leaders! A Chabad rabbi, Shalom Dov Wolpo, has been prosecuted for encouraging Israeli soldiers to refuse military orders to remove settlers from the West Bank. He said that according to Jewish law evacuating settlements is a worse sin than eating pig on Yom Kipur. He also thinks his late rebbe is the messiah too.

The Haredi leadership has once again been hurling the most abusive, childish insults at a democratic government that wants all its healthy citizens of 18 to either serve in the military or do some community service. I have always laughed at Neturei Karta, the Satmar fringe; unbalanced, suicidal Jews for their crazy support of the ayatollahs over Zionists. I try to reassure friends that every religion has its lunatic fringes. At least ours are non-violent (most of the time).

In the Diaspora, case after case of Haredi criminality, usually what we euphemistically call white-collar crime (little white lies?), hits the press in every country Haredi Jews live. And the idea that one can lie and deceive to gain social welfare benefits is so deeply rooted it is virtually rabbinically sanctioned.

The main claim against the Haredi world is that it insists that every single able-bodied male should sit and study, regardless of how mentally challenged

he might be, and refuse to do their civic duty in defense of the realm or supporting society. It is true that secular students get deferment for their studies if they choose. But the Haredi exemption applies to hundreds of thousands. This is a significant number of able-bodied young men in a society constantly at risk from enemies on all fronts. Leaving aside the moral argument, without army service one cannot get honest employment, and so one is encouraging idleness as well as poverty.

Worse is the refusal of the leadership to accept any secular education. So that if there are young men who are not suited to or, as is increasingly the case, who choose not to devote their lives to Torah, they are simply unequipped for anything else. More and more voices from within the Haredi community are now openly agreeing that the situation is untenable. Here's just one example:

<http://www.bhol.co.il/124578/0000-00-00000-000000-00-0000000-00000-000.html>.

Yet the old guard of Haredi leadership has consistently refused compromise. They are either myopic or geriatric.

Meanwhile they use the political system to gain massive subsidies. Why would a yeshiva like Mir, which I attended when it had 250 students, now have three thousand? It cannot possibly be selective or provide the in-depth pastoral care one would expect. It is only because the more students on the books, the greater the subsidy. So Haredi politics simply perpetuates and lavishes funds on the learning game, when only a small percentage are really taking full advantage of it. Many in the Haredi world, are dependent on welfare, a secular socialist concept they pretend to disdain. But which gives them the means and the leisure to travel the land and the world protesting and campaigning (and visiting graves).

So yes, the Haredi world has lot wrong with it. Their weird dress codes alone are grounds for ridicule. It is a mess. Though I would be hard-pressed to name one society that is not.

But let us be fair. There is an equal case to be made against the funding of universities that produce legions of young Israelis who hate the state and wish to see its demise. More and more secular Jews avoid the army and dream of escaping to material fleshpots elsewhere. And if the Haredi world is corrupt, the seculars are just as much in their way. [The Times of Israel reported this on September 11](#):

“Indeed, Israel’s democratic system has become riddled with corruption. Analysts who study Israel’s high-tech sector told The Times of Israel last year that an estimated 25 percent of the revenue of Israel’s lauded high-tech sector comes from shady or fraudulent industries, including online gambling, binary options, forex, downloaders/injectors (companies that put malevolent software on your computer without your knowledge), and the payment, affiliate marketing and adtech companies that service these industries.

“Israel’s Finance Ministry recently issued a report showing that

the cost of nearly every consumer product, with the exception of education and produce, is significantly higher in Israel than the OECD average. [Analysts attribute this high cost](#) to monopolists and rent seekers who pull strings and lobby the government to block competition in industry after industry. And the Knesset itself is riddled with interests, and criminal connections."

The health of a country, of any society lies in the balance between the good and the bad. I argue that for all the negative, the Haredi society contributes more than it is credited with to the health and moral wellbeing of Israel and its Diaspora communities. In education, welfare, and social infrastructure. Voluntary societies like ZAKA that deals with terrorist attacks and picking up the pieces literally, like Hatzalah that offers parallel service to Magen David Adom, endless soup kitchens charities, free loan funds, subsidized housing, free education, sick visiting, all contribute. Yes, they are overwhelmingly designed to help their own, but they do indeed go well beyond their own communities. More and more of them coming out of their shells, ignoring their negative leadership and entering commerce, academia, and public affairs, we have much, as Jews, to be grateful to them for. Even while they choose to stay and live in a Haredi secure and observant environment with its strictures against immodesty, pornography and decadence.

It is true their communities are often inward-looking and defensive. They tend to refuse to deal with molestation, abuse, beating, and other moral evils that the secular world takes more seriously. But their education is predicated on charity and good deeds even if, as in any society, some abuse and misuse the system. While some are intolerant, many are not. It is mainly when their enclaves are threatened that they react violently. We do not see them invading secular communities, trying to convert Tel Aviv.

But there is another, less tangible area where I believe they contribute. A Jewish society is measured by the extent of its commitment to its Jewish identity. Since Israel is a state for Jews (as well as a state for others), it needs to have a core of citizens devoted to its Jewish values. We can see the erosion of loyalty and patriotism everywhere today. It is true that Haredi patriotism is directed more to Torah than Zionism or nationalism, but their commitment is still to Jewish life and survival. I certainly prefer that to those who want to escape any Jewish identity.

The passion of the Haredi world, its commitment to Torah, mysticism, and religious ecstasy is no substitute for being proactive in defense of property and life. We do not rely on miracles. But it does most definitely contribute to the richness and vibrancy of Israeli and Jewish life. And if I despise religious politics, that sadly is how the State of Israel has run its affairs ever since 1948. I blame Ben Gurion for not changing the system.

Wherever we look we are faced with enormous challenges. As the prophet Ezekiel says, "There is the sword without and the plague within." We cannot afford to dismiss whole sectors of Jewish life just because we do not agree with them, whether to the left or the right. The festival of Sucot should

symbolize us all coming together, in one Suchah, one communal tent under the heavens. We should in no way hold back in our complaints and the causes that matter to us. But neither, as the saying goes, should we throw out the baby with the dirty bathwater.