

Israel's ultra-orthodox



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The economic situation among haredim is much better than the "official" poverty figures, says the Haredi Institute for Public Affairs.

The report on poverty and social gaps in 2017 published by the National Insurance Institute (NII) shows a general improvement in poverty in Israel. According to the report, the positive trend included *haredi* (Jewish ultra-Orthodox) society. Despite this improvement, however, one out of every two haredim is still classed as poor, compared with only one out of every 11 non-haredi Jews.

This portrayal does not correspond to the real situation. It ignores other aspects that should be taken into account and does an injustice to an entire group. In addition to the figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics on which the NII report was based, there are other figures based on a social survey and a consumer confidence survey by the Central Bureau of Statistics that make it

possible to analyze the economic situation and poverty of the population in general and among haredim in particular.

These two surveys show that the economic situation among haredim is much better than what is reflected in the "official" poverty figures. For example, most haredim are satisfied with their economic situation (only 30% said that they were dissatisfied with their economic situation in 2017). In other words, many of the people classed as poor are satisfied with the economic situation, and the proportion of dissatisfaction among haredim is also lower than among non-haredi Jews (35%) and Arabs (47%).

An examination of the subjective poverty rate (the proportion of people who feel poor) in haredi society shows that it is significantly lower than the prevalence of poverty according to the index - only 8%, the same proportion as among non-haredi Jews. In Arab society, on the other hand, in which one out of every two people is also classed as poor, the proportion of people feeling poor is high - 28%. The proportion of haredim who ever felt poor in their lives is both lower than the official rates, and lower than among non-haredi Jews (37% versus 35%).

Furthermore, only a fifth of haredim who felt that they had ever been poor said that they frequently felt poor, compared with a quarter of non-haredi Jews and one half of Arabs. Another finding shedding a positive light on situation of the haredi population is the proportion of households managing to save money from their regular budget. In 1987, 32% of haredim age 21 or more saved money, compared with only 7-8% of non-haredi society and more than double the 15% proportion among Arabs.

The official poverty index in Israel, like its equivalent in Western countries, is a relative index that examines the situation of each household relative to the economic situation of the general population. People's lifestyles, their perceptions and views, are connected to the society in which they live. People are inclined to compare themselves to those who are around them. One of the significant features of haredi Jews is their separation and seclusion from non-haredi society. The relevant reference group for this is therefore haredi

society, not society in general. Since income levels are low in most of haredi society, there is no feeling of poverty.

Haredim do not regard themselves and do not behave like poor people. The different concept of poverty in haredi society is affected by religious and cultural values, such as "satisfaction with their lot" and "making do with little." Poverty is usually a result of barriers and failures. In haredi society, however, low income is usually a deliberate choice of a way of life: learning Torah instead of going to work and the emphasis on a high birthrate, which entail foregoing wealth and increasing happiness. Mutual aid and assistance is prevalent, and the average consumption basket in a haredi household costs less than consumption in a non-haredi household. Daily life is entirely different.

At the nationwide level, poverty should be assessed according to a uniform standard. A uniform standard, however, does not give the full picture. In Arab society, for example, the poverty figures are consistent with surveys and studies. In the haredi sector, on the other hand, the gap between economic situation as reflected in the official figures and the actual situation is ostensibly a paradox. When government work plans are derived from the reports, additional aspects of poverty should be considered that will make it possible to detect those in need. Handling these cases should be focused and adjusted according to the needs and characteristics of the various population groups.

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