

Poor Pockets, Wealthy Wellbeing

Yonoson Rosenblum | Wednesday, June 27, 2018

At the second Annual Conference of the Haredi Institute for Public Affairs, held recently in the impressive Shalva Center in Jerusalem, President Reuven Rivlin put the conference, and the Institute as a whole, into perspective: In the early days of the state, he recalled, the goal of David Ben-Gurion and the Zionist leadership was to annul the past in order to forge an entirely new Jewish identity. Back then, the emphasis was on creating a single Israeli identity that would bind Jews from all the diverse lands of the Diaspora — and Torah Jews were the spoke in the wheel for that plan.



Today, said Rivlin, we no longer speak of annulling the past, but of celebrating the multifaceted diversity of Israeli society. We have recognized that firm roots to the past, with all of its diversity, strengthens Israeli society. And that newer attitude has created room for Torah Jews, as well. (Rivlin, as always, mentioned that he is the product of, on one side, the Rivlins who were from the original talmidei HaGra who made aliyah over two centuries ago, and, on the other side, the Rivlins who were talmidei HaBesht.)

That greater acceptance of Torah Jewry as an integral part of Israel today was reflected in the audience. Less than half those present were chareidi, and my eyeball estimate would be no more than one-third. The rest were there out of genuine interest in learning more about the community. In fact, the diversity in the audience mirrored the diversity in the very research staff of the Haredi Institute.

As we were leaving, after the conclusion of the conference, Rabbi Moshe Grylak commented to me about the radical change in attitude toward chareidim from that which he experienced as a yeshivah student in the 1950s. “Then we were really pursued,” he told me, “and the hatred for Torah was palpable.” That has almost entirely disappeared today.

THE CENTERPIECE of the conference was the Haredi Institute’s recently published comparative study on “The Quality of Life Among Israel’s Population Groups” — chareidim, non-chareidim, and Arabs. The study, dealing with quality of life and the self-perceptions of the country’s subgroups, was produced under the direction of Nitsa (Kaliner) Kasir and Dr. Dmitri Romanov. Kasir, who also serves as vice-chair of the Haredi Institute, was the founder and subsequently director of both the Labor and the Social Welfare Departments of the Bank of Israel, and Dr. Romanov was, for a decade, the chief scientist of the Central Bureau of Statistics.

The first panel dealt with the economic situation of chareidi households as indicated by the study. First, the depressing part: Poverty remains endemic in the chareidi community. The percentage of households living in poverty (defined as an average income per family member of less than half the national median) is 52% versus 8.7% for the non-chareidi Jewish population, according to government statistics. And the depth of the poverty is deeper in chareidi households, meaning that poor chareidi households are on average farther under the poverty line.

Fifteen percent of chareidim have had to forgo food at some point in the last year, and 28% of households experience some degree of food insecurity. On the second panel dealing with efforts to help chareidim in the direst straits, one of the panelists estimated that 60–70% of families who live in Beitar, a chareidi Jerusalem suburb, have accumulated debts in the tens of thousands of shekels.

All this is well known. But then came the real surprise: how chareidim evaluate their own economic situation. Only 7.7% report that they have felt poor in the past year — barely one-seventh of the percent whom the government classifies in that fashion. No less surprising, 71% of chareidim profess to be satisfied or very satisfied with their financial situation.

When I heard that, I thought to myself that perhaps they had responded to the question about economic satisfaction with a “baruch Hashem,” and the interviewer had written down “satisfied.” But I realized that could not be, for there is no “very baruch Hashem,” for those who are “very satisfied.”

Certainly, Israeli chareidim do feel financial pressure. Humor is a window into a community, and there's the old joke about saying "mazel tov" upon hearing an ambulance siren: It's either a birth, or a father having a heart attack at his daughter's vort. Those pressures are reflected further in a dramatic increase of chareidi men in the workforce. The official rate of male employment has shot up from 37% in 2004 to 52% today. Given the rapid growth of the community in that period, these numbers represent many tens of thousands of chareidi men entering the workforce.

Still, why don't many of these people, on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder, feel like they're poor? One reason is that poverty is also a social construct. If nearly everyone is in the same economic situation, one doesn't feel poor.

The expressions of satisfaction with the economic situation, however, are a bigger puzzle. One panelist suggested that many families simply do not know their economic situation. The widespread availability of gemachim push off the day of reckoning into the future.

But something else is clearly going on as well, and the objective health statistics of the chareidi community provide even stronger evidence that the expressed satisfaction with what looks like a dire economic situation is real. Israel does not collect statistics on longevity according to various population groups, but one constant is known: In cities with above 50,000 residents, the higher the socioeconomic level of the city, the longer-lived are its citizens.

That general rule, however, has three glaring exceptions: Bnei Brak, Jerusalem, and Beit Shemesh. All three are cities with high concentrations of chareidim. Yet despite being among the poorest cities in Israel, they have among the highest life spans. Apparently, chareidim live longer.

And that's not because chareidim are such health fanatics. True, rates of smoking in the chareidi community are less than half of that in the general Jewish population — a surprise to me. But chareidim are more likely to have forgone medical treatment due to financial considerations — 13% versus 8% — and dental care — 53% to 32%. Chareidi women over 40 are only two-thirds as likely to have had mammograms as women in the general Jewish population, and chareidi families are only about half as likely to have private medical insurance — 27% versus 51% in the general population.

The apparently greater longevity of chareidim seems to be directly linked to life satisfaction. The rate of chareidim pronouncing themselves satisfied or very satisfied with their lives is higher than the percentage of citizens who do so in any country in the world. They are also more optimistic: The percentage of those who expect an improvement in their financial situations is 64% versus 45% of their fellow Israeli Jews. And they experience loneliness far less — 11% versus 23%.

With the possible exception of being easy marks for con men promising returns too good to be true — in part a function of chareidi optimism — poor chareidim show few of the dysfunctional characteristics of other groups lower on the socioeconomic scale, such as high crime rates.

For instance, among the Arab population, food insecurity almost perfectly tracks the poverty rate. In the chareidi community, it is just about half the poverty rate. That means that chareidim are able to prioritize their spending in a disciplined fashion. (Perhaps one of the most surprising findings was that 32% of chareidi families report being able to save for apartments for their children.)

The reports' authors attribute the lack of typical dysfunctionality to the fact that poverty in the chareidi world is to a large extent a freely chosen lifestyle in order that the father can devote himself to Torah learning.

The happiest takeaway from the report — only a fraction of which I have discussed — is that the values by which Torah Jews profess to live are not mere lip service; they are deeply engrained and felt. Israeli chareidim are, to a remarkable extent, samei'ach b'chelkam and willing to be mistapek b'muat. And, most important, they find deep satisfaction in a life devoted to Torah and service of Hashem, in Whom they place their trust.

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