Can We Prevent the Hareidization of Orthodox Judaism?

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In the past generation, Orthodox Jewry in Israel has increasingly become more extreme and has isolated itself from mainstream Israeli society. There is a continued distance and alienation of the Orthodox population from the non-Orthodox community, and a seeming lack of interest in integrating halakha and Torah with the concerns and circumstances of modern life. A similar tendency can be seen in the American Modern Orthodox community, having shifted in the past years toward the right (both religiously and politically). This phenomenon is known as “the Hareidization of Orthodox Jewry.” This article introduces an Israeli organization that strives to promote an alternative route for Israeli Orthodoxy, mainly by returning to the core values of *Torah im derekh erets*, a religious worldview promulgated by the great nineteenth-century rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Ne'emanei Torah vaAvodah (NTA)

Ne'emanei Torah vaAvodah (NTA) is a religious Zionist non-political organization founded in 1978 as a reaction to the hareidization of Orthodox Jewry. It is highly committed to strengthening and restoring the foundations of religious Zionism. NTA promotes tolerance, equality, and social justice as key values within the religious community. We believe these values to be the ones that positively influence and define the unique Jewish and democratic character of Israeli society. The members of NTA, men and women, young and old, rabbis and academics, have come together to volunteer their time and energy in actualizing the potential of religious Zionism in Israel. NTA is committed to halakha and strives for an open, contemplative, and self-critical religious culture engaged in evolving halakhic discourse that is willing to address the challenges of our time.

In order to achieve these goals, the organization focuses on education and advocacy for modification and improvement of the religious public services offered in Israel, as well as high-quality publications, and public relations to bring our ideas into the forefront of the social-religious discourse. A few of NTA main activities will be described here.

The *De'ot* Journal

In the religious world, many social and educational issues are considered taboo and are therefore never discussed seriously. Religious discussions are often restricted to the holiness of the land and ritualistic stringency, whereas the values of human rights, human dignity, and democracy are pushed into a forgotten corner. We strongly believe the discourse must not exclude any of those issues, and we promote a pluralistic discussion within Orthodox society.
NTA publishes a journal, *De'ot*. Our main goal is to advance an open and courageous discussion within the Orthodox community of contemporary challenges, on the basis of a commitment to halakha combined with sensitivity to social issues. The journal offers a unique platform for presenting different approaches that deal with issues, difficulties, and problems that are largely ignored within the religious community. The writers of the *De'ot* journal are affiliated with a broad spectrum of the Orthodox community.
De'ot was the first journal to discuss publicly a variety of sensitive and complex topics in Orthodox society. Among those issues are: the participation of women in prayer and in the public reading of the Torah; homosexuality in the religious community; domestic violence in religious society; halakhic rulings regarding the Internet and their implications; premarital sex, and so forth. In addition, the journal also includes essays on a wide range of topics concerning the shaping of a Jewish-Israeli identity, in which alternative ways of thinking are formulated. In fact, *De'ot* is unique in being the only Orthodox journal in Israel that permits the publication of viewpoints that dissent from “conventional” opinions in the Orthodox community.

Et liDrosh ("A Time to Interpret")

Another publication that is meant to broaden the cultural and religious discourse is a Shabbath-Portion leaflet by the name of *Et liDrosh*, whose purpose is to provide a platform for a wide range of opinions, and in this way to enrich and vary the Orthodox discussions that are conducted by means of the Shabbat-Portion leaflets. Young people in the organization produce the leaflet, which deals with issues of particular concern to them and their outlook. The leaflet discusses religious and Israeli topics in an effort to bridge the religious and modern worlds. The writers of *Et liDrosh* are prominent cultural figures from religious and Israeli society, alongside young leaders who seek to take part in shaping the face of society. Past interviewees include Rabbi Yuval Cherlow and Rabbi Yehuda Gilad, Prof. Aviezer Ravizky, Ilana Dayan, and Ehud Banai. We believe that the exposure of the Orthodox public to different voices is likely to assist a formation of openness, tolerance, and attentiveness to different approaches.

Bet Midrash Re'im

The Orthodox community offers many institutions for Orthodox youth that are dedicated to the study of Torah. However, while the vast majority of Torah study institutions are run separately for women and for men, *Re’im* encourages men and women to learn together. We believe that the separation of men and women in the Bet Midrash detaches the experience of learning from life, and creates a reality in which the place where young people study Torah does not reflect their way of life.

For the past few years, NTA has operated a unique Orthodox Bet Midrash, named *Re'im* (Companions) open to both men and women. The Bet Midrash is composed of a group of young Orthodox men and women in their twenties, most of them students, graduates of institutes of higher Jewish learning. In the Bet Midrash *Re'im*, participants diligently study the Bible and Talmud and discuss issues in Jewish Thought, including a wide spectrum of topics connected to the general world's culture. The teachers combine in their lessons different historical and cultural perspectives, and special emphasis is given to

the relevance to the critical issues that concern day-to-day life in Israeli society in the twenty-first century.

Activities to Improve Religious Services in Israel

Religious services in the State of Israel are in a serious crisis. The lack of proper marriage and divorce proceedings, burial arrangements that are not always conducted with due sensitivity, the piling up of difficulties in the conversion process, and other issues that are not addressed properly—these all create situations of injustice and anguish to a wide sector of the Israeli and Jewish society who come into contact with the institutions responsible for religious services in Israel. These problems cause a severance of the general public from religious institutions and ultimately from Judaism itself. The public's lack of trust—and the increasing discoveries of corruption—have brought about the dismantling of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; but a solution has not yet been put into place for providing appropriate, well-administered religious services.

In an attempt to address these problems, NTA established a committee of experts, including rabbis and academics, whose task was to formulate a comprehensive program that will provide religious services in Israel. The committee, which operates on a volunteer basis, formulated its recommendations in a report entitled "Report of the Religious Services Committee," whose main conclusion speaks of the need to transfer administrative responsibility for matters pertaining to religion from the political echelon to the civilian realm.

NTA promotes the implementation of the Committee's recommendations through activities on the political level through an effort to form a lobby in the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) for changing the current structure of religious services in Israel. There is also a level of public awareness: our efforts are focused on exposing the wider public to the religious services crisis, and to offering possible solutions for addressing this situation.

NTA is the only organization in Israel that has dealt in a comprehensive way with the issues of religious services and has formulated a detailed proposal for changes. In this regard, the organization has dealt not only with the problem of marriage and divorce—with which many women's organizations are also involved—but also with the entirety of the issues related to the connection between religion and state. The implementation of the Report’s recommendations has the potential to initiate substantial, positive change in the relationship of citizens to religious services, and to constitute a turning point in the Jewish character of the State of Israel.

NTA cooperates with other organizations in working for a solution to specific problems in the area of religious services. In the *Ikar* coalition, we work together with organizations struggling for a solution to the problem of *aginut,* in which women whose husbands have refused to grant them a religious divorce are not free to remarry.

We take part in running the non-profit organization, *Menuha Nekhona–Jerusalem*. This organization was founded in order to provide an inclusive burial procedure for all Jews (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated) in Jerusalem. It is a known fact that an exclusively Hareidi monopoly runs all of the religious services in Israel, including all the burial procedures. This reality is even further emphasized in Jerusalem's cemetery, which is dominated by strict hlakhic rules. A daughter is not permitted to say Kaddish, a wife may not eulogize her husband, and a non-Orthodox Jew won't be buried unless approved by the Hareidi officials in charge. These are just a few examples of the problems of an exclusive Orthodox monopoly. NTA, together with *Menuha Nekhona,* strives to change this reality, and offers inclusive burial procedures in Jerusalem's cemetery. We already received approval from the Israeli Supreme Court for a burial area in Jerusalem's cemetery, and we plan to start using this area in the coming year.

Together with the women's organizations *Mavoi Satum* and *Kolekh*, we are teaming up with Modern Orthodox rabbinic groups in Israel and in America in a landmark initiative to create an alternative rabbinical court. This is an attempt to create a real change in the religious apparatus that chains woman, converts, immigrants, non-Orthodox Jews, and others, and holds the entire country hostage to an antiquated system of a Hareidi monopoly. We believe that this alternative Bet Din could be the way to break this monopoly, and we hope that it will start functioning in the coming months.

In conclusion, let me return to the title of this article: *Can we prevent the hareidization of Modern Orthodox Judaism?* There isn't, of course, any sure way to know how Orthodox Jewry will develop. We can promise, though, that in NTA we are doing everything possible within our means to promote a more pluralistic, tolerant, and inclusive Judaism that will restore the basic values of combining Torah with *derekh erets*; halakha with morality and human rights; the ancient Jewish tradition with the modern world. We hope we will succeed in preventing, to the extent possible, the hareidization of Modern Orthodox Jewry.
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