Upgrading the Hareidi Education System with General Subjects

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Israel's new political reality—with the two main Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi political parties, the Sephardic-based Shas party and the Ashkenazi-based United Torah Judaism, inside the government won't help the next generation of Haredi young people—in fact, on the contrary, it will perpetuate a broken system. While Shas and United Torah Judaism have negotiated financial windfalls for their constituencies, as well as a pull-back on the demand that Ultra-Orthodox young men serve in the Israeli Defense Force, this old style of conducting business could be harmful to our community's young people. That's because the reality is that education—not political power--is the key to the future for the Haredi community in Israel, especially if the government doesn't put advancing Haredim through education and employment at the core of the agenda.

"Educate each child according to his own path," the Book of Proverbs teaches us, "and he will not stray from it, even when he is old." And yet, when it comes to educating Haredi youth in Israel, we still have much to learn. Quite honestly, there is nothing short of an education crisis in our community. Rather than providing real choices, our leaders have traditionally insisted that Haredi students have only one path: a formal, rote curriculum dominated by intensive Talmud study, with no option for students to take general studies or complete an Israeli matriculation certificate. This is the path that is likely to dominate the agenda right now—and it is not the path that our young people need or deserve.

The reality is that in the absence of a meaningful alternative, nearly a third of Haredi teenage boys will continue to become alienated from both mainstream Israeli society and the traditional ways of their community. Many drop out of school, spend their time on the streets, or are lost to the Haredi community altogether. They are unable to build families and successful lives.

Those yeshivas that do offer secular matriculation (and there are only a handful in the entire country) are far too expensive for most Haredi families to afford.

By creating Hachmey Lev Yeshiva High School, my aim is to do nothing short of transforming the Yeshiva model. We offer teens who are under stimulated in classical Yeshiva settings the opportunity to maximize their social, educational, and cognitive potential all while still maintaining a Haredi lifestyle. We are teaching the boys Gemara at the highest standards, in Hebrew and without compromise, and to live a Haredi lifestyle that will also allow them to earn a good living for themselves and their future families.

I was inspired to create Hachmay Lev based on my own family's experience when our son reached seventh grade and boredom got the better of him. He showed little interest in his traditional yeshiva schooling. As a product of this schooling myself, I know the value of its rigor, but this model simply is outmoded for today's young people.

Our students combine study of Talmud (32 hours each week) and general studies (20 hours each week), giving them a broader education than any other Haredi institutions in Israel. They study the core curriculum like English, math, history, Bible, civics, computer science, and Hebrew, while also enjoying music and sports. Students sleep in Jerusalem during the week and return home on weekends. Once the model has been fine-tuned, Hachmey Lev will be replicated in other locations across Israel.

I spent ten years putting Haredim into the workforce and that's why I know that education is the core issue. After spending a lifetime of activism in the Haredi community on a variety of pressing issues, including making sure that our men serve in the IDF, and find gainful employment, I am convinced that unless and until we transform our educational system, there will simply never be the systemic change that we need.

North American and British donors know the necessity of getting the 20% of Israeli society that is Haredi into the workforce—and are supporting efforts to increase employment opportunities in the Haredi community, so that our young

people can have new models to emulate. Philanthropists outside of Israel also know that Israel is the global exception, since nowhere else in the world are young people exempt from learning a broad range of studies or from working. But, money for employment without strengthening and expanding serious alternative educational models won't create the type of workers for a 21st century workforce that Israel needs.

Philanthropists who want to impact the Israeli economy need to invest in educational models that will recast the pattern of poverty in our community. Now, more than ever, those of us who trying to change Haredi society from within need to show that our model can work for a broader segment of our community.

www.kidum-edu.org.il/en/education-campuses/hachmey-lev-yeshiva-high-school