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## Haredi Chinuch: The Role of Education and Technology on the Borders of Ultra-Orthodox Communities

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Haredi Chinuch: The Role of Education and Technology on the Borders of Ultra-Orthodox  
Communities

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication:

I dedicate this project to my grandparents, Mary and Freddy Stewart and Barbara and Gene Cohen.



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## Introduction

As I began thinking about what I would want to research for this project, I was reading a series of memoirs that incidentally had a striking similarity. All of the authors left separatist groups because they found education that fulfilled them more than their communities ever had. Each of these memoirs follows a similar story line. The authors find books that they recognize themselves in, which creates a desire to continue to find resources they relate to. This discovery leads each author continually to run into the boundaries of their communities, until they eventually make the decision to separate themselves.

This storyline captivated me, and I wanted to learn more. I theorized that those who were educated could no longer see themselves in communities with strict fundamentalist values. I believed that education would inevitably tear anyone apart from their communities. I became specifically interested in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox, or *Haredi*, communities and their relationship to education. As a member of the Jewish community, I have always been aware of education's fundamental place in the Jewish groups I have been a part of. Additionally, while spending a gap year studying Jewish studies, the more I learned about Haredi communities, the more I comprehended that education is a specifically crucial piece of their existence. Men in Haredi communities attend schools called *Yeshivot*. One of the highest achievements for a man in the Ultra-Orthodox community is to be a learned Torah scholar. This emphasis on education as the central tenant of a successful Haredi man is unique among fundamentalist groups. Because of this unique value system in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, I became more interested in education's role in keeping people in the community as opposed to giving them the confidence to leave.

In the past few years, mainstream media has been particularly interested in the story of those who leave the Haredi world. Since 2020, Netflix has released two shows following individual stories of women who rejected their Ultra-Orthodox upbringing. This includes the limited series, *Unorthodox*, which is based on a memoir of the same name. This show follows a woman leaving the *Satmar* community.<sup>1</sup> Satmar is a Hungarian sect of *Hasidism*, which is a subgroup of Haredi Judaism, known for its strictness, insularity, and focus on religious education. This show illustrates a fast and dramatic escape from an extreme and isolated community. The book, however, gives more detail about the slow process of deciding to leave, starting with the discovery of secular books in public libraries in Brooklyn. Netflix additionally released a show called *My Unorthodox Life*. This show follows Julia Haart, a CEO of a successful modeling agency who left her Haredi community. She details her experience as an escape of oppressive fundamentalist values.<sup>2</sup> Both of these shows as well as many other forms of popular media show Haredi communities as if they are completely separated and isolated from the rest of the world.

In beginning my research, I began to find that while this story of a dramatic escape is the one often told, it is not the main story for these communities. Haredi communities in the United States exist largely within New York City, a modern cosmopolitan center for secular culture. There are no physical boundaries between Haredi communities and the rest of the city. Furthermore, there is even intentional interaction between Haredi communities and secular systems and culture. How, then, does the Orthodox community have the highest retention rate of

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Deborah. *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. Reprint edition, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Mayes, Joshua. *My Unorthodox Life*. 3BMG, Jeff Jenkins Productions, 2021.

Jewish sects in America?<sup>3</sup> How are Hasidic communities the fastest growing Jewish communities in New York City?<sup>4</sup> Why aren't more community members tempted by the secular world when, if they actively seek it out, a secular education would be easy for them to obtain?

These questions became the guiding force of my research, and led me to look at those who stay, rather than those who leave. Broadly, what I have done in this paper is a case study of the borders of the Haredi community, how they are decided and how they are maintained. More specifically, what opened up to me through my research is the case study of teens struggling with their connection to their Orthodox beliefs and community, and their resources for parents seeking help for them.

What I have discovered is that throughout the history of Haredi communities existing in the United States, there have been intentional and strategic efforts to decide how and when secular culture can be allowed into the community. Moreover, through the work of Nathaniel Dutech and Michael Caspar, that all Haredi communities must have interaction with the secular world.<sup>5</sup> For different sects of Haredi Judaism, this answer is different, but for each, there is a specific method of control for enforcing these boundaries. Based on the research of Ayala Fader, I am arguing that the school is one of the central places for control and monitoring in Haredi communities.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, through exploration of online Haredi resources, I have found that some experts within the community believe the Haredi world to be at a time of change. They

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<sup>3</sup> "Jewish Americans in 2020." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 11 May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Caspar. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

suggest that boundaries between the secular and religious can and should be bent and changed in order to keep those who are struggling within the community.

In Chapter One, I examine the work of Nathaniel Deutch and Michael Caspar in their book, *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. This book details the history of the Satmar community settling in the United States. They argue in their book that the Satmar community is able to succeed in New York City by maintaining a balance of remaining incredibly insular, while learning how to master and manipulate American political systems for economic and welfare benefits. Deutch and Caspar argue that the Satmar community, one of the most staunchly anti-assimilationist Hasidic communities, is still required to involve themselves in secular culture in order to guarantee their survival and success. With the allowance of secular culture into isolated religious societies, the risk that community members will be tempted to leave or assimilate is amplified. With the understanding that all Haredi communities are involved in some degree of secular culture, I will then examine Ayala Fader's book, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. This book analyzes and articulates how borders are dealt with in the daily lives of women in the *Bobover* community. Bobover is a sect of Hasidism, like the Satmar, but they are less isolated. Using this information, I argue that schools and childrearing practices are the central creators and enforcers of the borders between the Haredi and secular worlds.

In Chapter Two, I will look at the change that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to Haredi communities and their relationship with technology. In order for Haredi communities to maintain their commitment to education, and, like the rest of the world, continue communication outside of their homes, technology use became crucial. While the long term effects of this are still

unknown, what has happened, is that new participatory platforms for communication through the Haredi world have been created. I follow the story of the creation of the podcast and weekly lesson, or *shiur*, *Let's Get Real with Coach Menachem*.<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I walk through how this platform was created, how it typically functions, and the topics discussed. I discover that the most popular topic on this platform is lectures on helping parents with children who struggle with their Orthodox identity. This is significant because the advent of platforms such as these allow for previously private issues to become public, for parents to create community and share their stories, and for experts to share ideas and challenge previously held beliefs in the community to a wide audience.

In Chapter Three, I conduct a case study of individual stories from many Haredi online platforms. Each of the examples illustrates parents, professionals, and community members' ideas of how children struggling with their faith should be helped. In most cases, the struggle is intrinsically tied with their experience in school. Additionally, in each of these cases, the solution presented or employed is to loosen the boundaries for that child, to treat them with love, and to address their individual needs over the community's expectations. This suggests a change in the system that has previously existed in Haredi education. These cases show a wide group of Haredi community members arguing that the borders of their society should be changing.

To conclude the paper, I address how the advent of new online self help platforms made by and for Haredi people could possibly affect the Haredi community in the future. While it is not possible to know the effect these platforms will have on the community, there is a serious possibility that they will impact change. They are platforms that are accessed across a spectrum

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<sup>7</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem, and Usher Parnes. *Let's Get Real with Coach Menachem*.

of Ultra-Orthodox groups, they engage community members in a new way, and provide a forum for communication about the changes people wish to make in the Haredi world.

## Chapter One: History of Hasidic Borders

New York City is the most populous city in the United States and one of the most influential metropolitan centers for secular culture in the world. In the midst of this modern, diverse, and secular city, the Hasidic communities are the “fastest-growing segment of the Jewish population”.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the vast majority of the American Ultra Orthodox, or Haredi community is located in or near New York city. This has only been possible because of community leaders' persistent use and mastery of secular political systems, even while remaining incredibly insular and, in many ways, separatist. Scholars agree that in order for Hasidic communities to sustain themselves as religious in a secular world, rules must be strictly defined and monitored. Hasidic communities have created systems in order to enforce and regulate when and how these borders can be crossed, and when they cannot.

Many scholars have addressed the question of how Hasidic communities interact with the borders of their religious society and the secular world around them. The insular nature of Hasidic communities is a story often told. This story of isolation and separatism is what dominates the general public's knowledge of Ultra-Orthodox communities. *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America* is the title of the first in-depth documentary made about the New York Hasidic community.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Berger, a *New York Times* journalist, wrote a 2014 book entitled, *The Pious Ones: The World of Hasidism and Their Battles with America*<sup>10</sup>, chronicling the threat of outside exposure to the Hasidic world. His first chapter is titled, “A People Apart”.

Descriptions for popular memoirs about those who leave the Haredi world, such as *Unorthodox*:

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<sup>8</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Casper. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Daum, Menachem, et al. *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America*. Oren Rudavsky Productions.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, Joseph. *The Pious Ones: The World of Hasidim and Their Battles with America*. Original edition, Harper Perennial, 2014.

*The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*<sup>11</sup>, or *All Who Go Do Not Return*<sup>12</sup>, include descriptions of “escape” and “insularity”. Popular media around Haredi culture shows the community as entirely separatist. Descriptions of the community as “apart” from the rest of the world, or as “insular” permeate most texts and many peoples’ views on Haredi culture. While the Haredi community is undoubtedly insular and separatist, their communities exist and function within American cities with the American political system. Their relationship to the secular world is more complex than simply, “a life apart”.

In this chapter, I will focus on two works in particular, which explore in different ways the nature of the boundaries, the sophistication of Hasidic engagement with the secular world and the risks that this creates. Nathaniel Duetch and Michael Casper explain how and why borders were created and the ways in which the Satmar and Hasidic communities have built a “Fortress in Brooklyn”.<sup>13</sup> Ayala Fader, focuses particularly on Hasidic girls in the Bobover Community and explores the differences between how boys and girls are raised.<sup>14</sup> What both of them do is explore through different lenses where Hasidic communities come into contact with the secular world and how that is handled. Duetch and Caspar sketch the way that the New York Hasidic community masters the political tools necessary for their communities survival. Namely, the ability to remain insular for religious purity and community satisfaction, while still navigating a secular political world for economic advancement. I am using this work to explain how the Satmar community established their borders and in doing so, forced all other Jews to

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<sup>11</sup> Feldman, Deborah. *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. Reprint edition, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Deen, Shulem. *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Casper. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009.



either change or leave the community. Yet, at the other end of the extreme, they realized their future lay in the mastery of the secular political world in order for them to guarantee economic stability and welfare benefits. This story illustrates the complex relationship between Hasidic communities and their borders to the secular world.

Duetch and Caspar's book does not illustrate the ways in which the borders of the Hasidic world impact the daily lives of community members. Through interviews of mothers and observation of classrooms and other primarily female settings, Ayala Fader illustrates how the borders are dealt with in everyday settings. She argues that the community deliberately exposes women to more secular culture and language as they grow older in order for them to be the breadwinners of their families. In doing this, Ayala Fader centers the school and child rearing as the main influencer and enforcer of everyday border interactions. What I want to highlight in Caspar and Deutch, and Ayala Fader's, work is the necessity for Hasidic communities to remain both insular and active in the secular world, and the tools needed by the community to ensure that happens. Religious leaders and community institutions, specifically schools, play a large role as the enforcer of these boundaries.

Most scholars identify the choices made by the Hasidic community with their struggle for survival following the Holocaust. After World War II, Jewish communities were facing an unknown territory. The question of where to relocate and how the relocation would take place was central to Jews displaced from the Holocaust. As argued in *A Fortress in Brooklyn*, this question was particularly central to those involved in Ultra-Orthodox communities who followed specific leaders and ways of life. Hasidic leaders did not originally hope or intend for their communities to end up in Brooklyn. Before World War II, Hasidic Jews had refused to come to America because they believed it was so impure that even the air and the water could “defile a religious man”.<sup>15</sup> After the Holocaust, however, safety and survival became the biggest concern for these communities. Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar *Rebbe*<sup>16</sup>, escaped the Holocaust to Israel, but because of his staunchly anti-Zionist views, he moved to America after a year.<sup>17</sup> The Satmar are a Hungarian sect of Hasidic Judaism. They are notable for their extreme religious strictness and isolation from other communities, including other Jewish communities. The Hungarian Hasidic tradition encourages separatism in order to protect their communities from ideological contamination.<sup>18</sup> This mindset had a large impact on the type of community they built once they settled into their cosmopolitan home in Williamsburg.

As Deutsch and Casper explain, Before Teitelbaum arrived and set up his community, Williamsburg was already a center of Orthodox Judaism in the United States. There were many religious schools, synagogues, and kosher shopping options. However, the residents of this

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Religious leader of a Hasidic sect.

<sup>17</sup> Many Hasidic Jews are anti-Zionist because they believe that Jews cannot return to their homeland until the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>18</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Casper. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021, 22.

community were assimilated into American culture in their dress, work, and conduct.<sup>19</sup> As this was a religious neighborhood, though not to the standards of the incoming Hasidic community, it was seen as a comfortable place for the Satmar to take root and build. Additionally, this neighborhood was largely working class, making it a more opportune place to set up a community because of the large amounts of tenements, apartment buildings, and low income housing. Because of the economic situation, this neighborhood was undesirable to most Jewish immigrants, but it was very desirable to Teitelbaum who denounced Yiddish luxury.<sup>20</sup> This was the first of many intentional political moves that allowed for an insular Satmar community.

In the two decades following Yoel Titlebaum's arrival in the United States, he systematically transformed Williamsburg into a thriving separatist Hasidic community. This process of change included extreme population growth because of high birth rates, the creation of self-sufficient Hasidic businesses and institutions, adoption of Hasidic practices by Jewish members who previously inhabited the neighborhood, and the outmigration of all other remaining Jews.<sup>21</sup> This process was done with great intention and direction, and required the mastery of existing political systems in order to delegitimize the previous Jewish ways of life and replace them with the Satmars' particularly rigid Hasidic ideology.

Teitelbaum, still wary of his communities ability to survive after the Holocaust, believed that Orthodox Jews who accepted American culture posed a threat to the survival of his non-assimilationist community. He saw any tilt towards assimilation as a threat to survival and was concerned that religious Jews would believe it acceptable to allow more and more American

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 31.

culture into their lives. He, therefore, declared all Jewish institutions previously present to not be up to religious standards and commissioned the making of Satmar schools, shops, butchers, and more.<sup>22</sup> These institutions functioned largely to establish, monitor, and influence religious adherence in the community. Because of Teitelbaum's strict undermining of all Jewish institutions that allowed the influence of American culture, the Satmar, too, had to change their ways of life in favor of stricter adherence to religious laws. The first generation of Hungarian Jews in Williamsburg did not all speak Yiddish as their first language, did not all wear Hasidic and extremely modest clothing, and even belonged to different sects of Judaism in Hungary. Because of the active choices made by Teitelbaum to create strict standards for his community, the following generations lived in a more Hasidic way than even their European ancestors had.<sup>23</sup>

However, Deutsch and Casper argue that this separatism, which was most visible, went hand in hand with a deep engagement with secular New York life. Teitelbaum and other religious leaders had to learn to manipulate the American political system in order to have the community's needs met. One of the most crucial influences on the survival of the Hasidic community was their response to urban flight and suburbanization. While middle class Jews were following the trends of other white Americans and fleeing cities for the suburbs, Hasidic Jews remained firmly in New York City.<sup>24</sup> They were a working class society and benefited from the availability of work and housing. Hasidic Jews have large families, and often have very little income because their community values religious education, not secular. This makes it difficult for Hasidic Jews to have high paying jobs, and therefore, creates high poverty rates in the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 39.

community. In order to combat the damage this might do to the community, Satmar leaders became politically active in order to take advantage of government aid.

For Satmars, as recounted by Deutsch and Casper, the most significant element in this engagement was for their community to obtain government welfare assistance. Satmar Jews protested their lack of representation in public services and funding. Because of these protests, Hasidic Jews were successfully granted disadvantaged status, and therefore, were eligible for more government aid.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the Satmar were adept at working with politicians for their mutual benefit. Hasids have great political power because of their large numbers, and the fact that they vote as a block. Despite their lack of care for American political issues, they are incredibly politically involved for their own benefit. Hasidic communities will endorse and vote for candidates, Jewish or non-Jewish, democratic or republican, who promise to support their needs.<sup>26</sup>

Deutch and Caspar present public housing as an example of Satmar leaders and politicians mutually using each other for their benefit. At the same time that the Satmar were seeking greater aid, the US government was creating new housing projects. The New York City Housing Association was attempting to create projects that integrated with the community, rather than disrupted them. Additionally, they were attempting to change the idea that public housing was minority housing.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, they wanted demographics to indicate that large numbers of white people were living in housing projects.<sup>28</sup> Satmar Jews were more than willing to assist this goal by moving into government subsidized housing, but they required their religious needs to be

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

met. Satmar families were given priority selection for the Williamsburg projects, allowed to have apartments on the lower floors to accommodate not using elevators for Shabbat, and Shabbat elevators were invented which stopped on every floor and required no change in electricity usage.<sup>29</sup> Prominent families were given the best apartments to move into which encouraged many other Satmar families to flock to these buildings.<sup>30</sup> The government got what they wanted by having whiter demographics living in projects and the Satmar got government subsidized housing allowing them to continue living in their community through gentrification.

Teitelbaum was both incredibly aware of how much he needed to create an insular and separatist community, as well as how he could use secular politics to benefit his community. This balance has created a remarkable system where the Satmar community is able to thrive as insular, but benefit from secular American culture, only when it can strengthen their community. Doing this requires a complex system of control that monitors just how much and when borders between their religious world and the larger secular world can be bent and crossed. Teitelbaum controlled his community by making a conscious shift towards a more religious way of life. He undermined all previously constructed Jewish institutions and created new ones that supported his beliefs. He harnessed the power of the community's large numbers to engage with the American government only in matters that were important to the survival of Hasidic groups. Nathaniel Duetch and Michael Caspar explain how all of these factors have come together and argue that with these strategies, Williamsburg was made into a powerful and isolated Hasidic enclave.

Nathaniel Duetch and Michael Caspar use their book to explain how Hasidic

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 61.

communities settled and gained control over Williamsburg. They explain how the conscious choice for Hasidic groups to be insular, in control of institutions, and manipulative of the American political system, all contribute to the necessary tools for surviving as a religious group in a secular city. This shows that while Hasidic communities have an anti-assimilation stance and would prefer to be separatist, in order for them to survive, they must interact and master the secular world for their benefit. This allowance of secular society to influence their community means that rules must define how and when secular culture can be allowed in. Ayala Fader adds to this scholarship by arguing that women have the social capacity to move through either side of the border of religiosity and secularity. Women work in the secular world, they have more English and secular instruction in schools than men do, and they are responsible for navigating any business that has to be conducted outside of the Hasidic world. In arguing this, Ayala Fader looks closely at which areas of secular life women are allowed to participate in, and what is too far. In doing so, she focuses on the borders of Hasidic society and the ways they are monitored. Although her research focuses on education in part for accessibility reasons, her book highlights the crucial role that school and child rearing play in deciding on and monitoring the borders of the Bobover community. I am using this work to argue that education is the main battleground for how secular culture can influence the Hasidic world, including through language, modesty, and access to secular information.

Schools play the role of management and policing Hasidic communities in three main ways. Firstly, Hasidic education is a tool for having each child conceive of themselves as Jewish, and therefore special. Ayala Fader explains that children are raised to follow *mitzvos*<sup>31</sup> and are

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<sup>31</sup> Following Jewish commandments or doing good deeds

rewarded when acting in a Jewish way. Conceptions of normal and good are taught to be intrinsically Jewish. Additionally, freedom as a concept is taught to be limited. True freedom in Hasidic education is to know which freedoms are not worth having.<sup>32</sup> Freedom requires the great sacrifice of only pursuing autonomy within Hasidic constraints, which binds members further to the community. Therefore, as children grow up in Hasidic communities, they grow to believe that being good means being Jewish and that reward comes from following the Jewish commandments.

Secondly, schools manage Hasidic community members of all ages by requiring certain levels of religious observance in order for children to be allowed to attend. Schools want institutional education to mirror education in the home. Fader uses examples of how schools extend their reach into homes, and home life is reflected in education. Parents fill out forms about their children when they are not at school, these are given to teachers so they can reward or punish students for their actions at home.

Thirdly, schools manage the community by creating and monitoring religious standards on debated topics. Schools are one of the central sites for debates on topics of religious levels such as modesty, language, and access to knowledge; through books or technology. Decisions are made by rabbis, they are enforced by school administrators and teachers, and families must agree to mirror these practices in their homes.<sup>33</sup> The school therefore, exerts its control over the community in a myriad of ways, all acting to ensure that Hasidic communities have standards

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<sup>32</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 61.

<sup>33</sup> This argument is shown by examples that will be further explored later in this chapter. They include: Rabbis in Lakewood NJ decided that their community had a problem with their technology use. To enforce less use, all Yeshivot in Lakewood required students enrolled in their schools to agree not to have a computer at home. In *Mitzvah Girls*, Rabbis decided that they wanted less English spoken in their communities. Therefore, teachers attempted to enforce the use of only Yiddish in their classrooms.



and policed boundaries.

Bobover is a sect of Hasidism and their American community is located in Boro Park, Brooklyn. This sect of Hasidism, while still religiously stringent, is of the more permissive Hasidic groups present in New York City. Fader works with this group because they are easier to access than stricter and more closed off groups. This choice additionally leads to interesting discoveries as their more liberal beliefs lead them to grapple with the borders of their community with secularism far more often than more than more religiously uncompromising groups.

The first way that schools manage Hasidic communities is by their standards on raising children and the rhetoric and reward used in the classroom and the home. Hasidic children are taught at a very young age that they are different from the non-Jewish communities around them. In observing a preschool, Ayala Fader found that boys at 3 sing songs in front of their classes about the distinctiveness of being Jewish. A common song that is sung goes:

I have *tsitses*<sup>34</sup> already. I have side curls already.  
I'm big already. I'm big already.  
I show the whole world, I show the whole world that I am a Jew!<sup>35</sup>

This song has a clear message to young school children that they should be proud of their Jewish appearance and that it is necessary and important to show the world that they are Jewish, and therefore, special.

Additionally, Hasidic children are taught that they are essentially different from gentiles because they have the ability to fight off their evil inclinations, an ability that they are told

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<sup>34</sup> Ritual fringes worn on the corner of a talis (prayer shawl)

<sup>35</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 54.

gentiles do not possess.<sup>36</sup> Fader argues that schools impart the knowledge on Hasidic children that being Jewish is good and being a gentile is bad. This means that as they grow up, the conception of themselves as Jewish is intrinsically tied with their conceptions of themselves as morally good and normal. This lesson, taught in schools and replicated in the home, connects children to their Jewish community and makes them believe that leaving and becoming a gentile is akin to evil.

As explained in *Mitzvah Girls*, reward is another crucial tactic used to teach Hasidic children right from wrong. The distinction between normal and not normal in Hasidic communities is acting in a Hasidic way or acting in a way that goes against Hasidic laws and practices.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, when kids are rewarded for doing something Jewish, they are told that they are rewarded for acting ‘normally’ or doing the right thing. Physical rewards are used to teach this lesson because it is believed that children do not yet have the control and foresight to recognize the reward they will receive for Jewish behavior in the afterlife.<sup>38</sup> Using physical reward to represent a later spiritual reward keeps the language around *mitzvos* continuous throughout a Hasid’s life. Schools teach that doing the Jewish thing is the right thing, and further, that reward will be received for acting in such a way. This is crucial to the socialization of children into adulthood because the lessons taught in school of how to act are referred back to once kids graduate. Throughout a Hasidic community member’s life, they are reminded of the spiritual rewards they will receive on account of their Jewish choices, and threatened that this reward will be taken away for acting against Judaism. Schools are the place where this

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 48.

socialization and rhetoric originates and becomes recognizable to community members as they age.

This system of rewards perpetuated by schools ensures that expectations are maintained as children grow older. Conceptions of freedom in the childrearing of Hasids are distinct from secular communities. Ayala Fader explains that, for the women she worked with, freedom and agency are seen as the result and reward of moral training.<sup>39</sup> Kids become free to make their own choices as they become morally trained adults, who, from the rewards they received as children, know right from wrong. True freedom is taught to have restrictions. Freedom as expressed in Hasidic communities is the ability to understand what forms of freedom are not worth having, resulting in spiritual reward.<sup>40</sup> Freedom as a concept is bound up with Hasidic values, and it is only through enacting this freedom that children are taught they will receive reward, physical and spiritual. This moral training implicit in the raising of all Hasidic children directly affects their desire to stay in the Hasidic community. The childrearing system in the Bobover community intentionally creates a conception of freedom that exists within Hasidic rules to ensure that children will grow up to see themselves as free, while still being bound to Hasidism.

Shulem Deen, an ex-Hasid from the Skver community, a very insular Ukrainian Hasidic group located outside of New York City, echoes this sentiment when talking about his memoir, *All Who Go Do Not Return*. His memoir centers around his journey leaving the Skver community. In an interview about this memoir, he explains that he believes Hasidic groups are so successful in containing their members because of their education.<sup>41</sup> Deen explains that as a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Heilbrunn, Bernice. *Shulem Deen, "All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir."*

child, and for the vast majority of children in the community, he never questioned his faith. He argues that the success of this lies in the ‘indoctrination’ of children at a young age into a belief system that they wholeheartedly believe is the only correct way to live. Schooling and education for Hasidic children are crucial for the management of their communities. It is how they are taught what it means for them to be a Jew, the conception of themselves as right for their beliefs, and that gentiles are wrong for theirs.

The second way that schools manage Hasidic communities is by their impact on those who are no longer actively in schools. Moral standards taught in schools are not only for the monitoring of children, but also their parents and family members. Parents and families must agree to a certain level of religious stringency in order for their children to be accepted into specific schools.<sup>42</sup> In this way, Hasidic schools exert control over the general population by maintaining a minimum level of religious observance. Hasidic community members decide their sect of Hasidism by deciding which Rebbe’s teachings to follow. Largely, the differences between sects of Hasidism are manifested in how strict the interpretations of Jewish Laws are. Schools in each sect of Hasidism will have different rules that adhere to the Rebbe’s interpretation. Schools are the most central place for these rules to be monitored and required of community members. While schools are not the ones making decisions for the community, by creating standards of religiosity for entire families as a prerequisite for attending school, they are the main enforcers of the decisions. Schools monitor families in a variety of different ways, including their adherence to Jewish laws, their access to secular knowledge, their modesty, and their language.

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<sup>42</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

The reach of schools into homes goes further than prerequisites. It is believed that homes and schools should have continuity for the benefit of children's education. As a manifestation of this, teachers send home behavior charts for parents to fill out about their children. Ayala Fader explains that these charts include information about when their children go to bed, if they were respectful to adults and peers, if they studied, etc.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, if parents see their child performing *mitzvos* at home, they can send their child into school with a paper describing their good deed.<sup>44</sup> Teachers will then read this in front of the whole class in order to praise the child for their actions. Children are aware that the ways that they act at school are expected to be continued at home, creating continuity throughout the community. Additionally, this expectation of continuity monitors parents' way of life. According to prominent Haredi speakers from self-help podcasts, parents can effectively create boundaries for their children by always being the example. Children pick up on the actions of their parents and copy their attitude. Therefore, when parents agree to hold standards for their children, they are in turn, agreeing to uphold them as well.<sup>45</sup> Hasidic schools police the values of all members of the community, even into adulthood.

Schools impact Hasidic communities in a third important way. When new issues arise in Hasidic communities, schools are often the sites of important religious debates. All of these debates are under the umbrella category of how much secular culture is allowed to influence their communities. One question that has been debated for generations and is a clear marker of difference between sects of Hasidism is the use of secular versus religious language.

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<sup>43</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Coach Menachem Bernfeld. *Setting Boundaries for Younger Children*, Rabbi Shlomo Usher Tauber. 2022.

Ayala Fader focuses on language as an important indicator of religious levels in Hasidic communities. In more stringent sects, such as the Satmar, everyone in the community only uses Yiddish. In the Bobover community, however, far more English is accepted. This is because women often have jobs that serve a secular population, and therefore, must speak English to effectively do their jobs. Additionally, when American Hasidic communities made a conscious shift to a more distinctive way of life, language became a more important indicator of difference.

<sup>46</sup> Because in previous generations, language was not as much of a marker of religiosity, many women in older generations do not know Yiddish.<sup>47</sup> Language is a place of tension in Hasidic communities because of its newly formed religious significance, and because of its vastly different levels of acceptance in different sects of Hasidism. Schools are the place that set and monitor the standards of language in Hasidic communities. In a Satmar school, girls would never speak English, but in a Bobover school, the use of English is constantly debated. This standard set by schools impacts the wider community. In Satmar communities, women do not speak English and do not have jobs in secular communities. In the Bobover community, the most common language spoken by women is English and they hold jobs outside of the community.<sup>48</sup> The school is the indicator and teacher of what type of language is acceptable for different communities.

Schools also serve as the setting for debates and standards on modesty. In school, lessons are taught to girls about the importance of the difference in their dress as compared to gentiles. In

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<sup>46</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Casper. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021,

<sup>47</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 110.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

an example from Fader's research, a teacher tells the story of Jews being confused for gentiles in public because they had loose hair, they were speaking loudly, and acting disorderly. She warns of the importance of remembering their place and their superiority as Jews, and therefore, dressing and acting modestly in order to show that difference to the world.<sup>49</sup> Children are taught how they must dress and act in schools, and this must be translated into their home and public lives. Parents must match their children's level of modesty in order to be an example for them and in order to represent the school their children belong to in public. Decisions about the level of modesty and how girls must dress come from Rebbes, move down to school administrators, to teachers and students, and then home and into the community.

Similarly to language differentiation, Bobover girls can dress more modern than Satmar girls, but they must still look Jewish. Schools create these standards by how their teachers dress and by what is allowed in schools. In Bobover schools, however, the standards for modesty are still strict. Ayala Fader observes that children playing at recess are often reminded to leave their skirts over their ankles, even if it isn't convenient for jump rope.<sup>50</sup> The school creates the standard for the Bobover community that dressing more modern is okay, but modesty must remain. This standard is echoed by parents and community members outside of the school, but the lessons and decisions are made within the school. School is the central space of dissemination and enforcement of ideas of modesty into the community.

A more recent debate in Hasidic communities and in schools is that of the use of technology. This debate has stemmed from a generations long debate over how much secular knowledge is welcomed into Hasidic schools and communities. The origins of this can be seen

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 158-159.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 156-157.

through debates on how much of the day secular subjects should be taught in schools versus how much of the day should be spent on religious subjects. The threat of secular knowledge's invasion into the Hasidic world is also demonstrated through schools' banning of access to public libraries. Ayala Fader attends lectures that are held for women on the dangers of secular novels, and witnesses schools making parents agree to not allow their children to go to public libraries.<sup>51</sup> Spot checks were conducted in schools where girls' backpacks were searched to make sure that no banned literature was being read. These spot checks happened in order for the school to enforce the ban on secular books, as parents were still allowing their children to go to libraries. Knowledge is one of the more difficult things for schools to restrict, and technology is no different.

In a newer book about technology's effect on Hasidic communities, Ayala Fader explains that parents are often required to give up some of their internet capabilities in order for their children to be allowed to attend specific schools.<sup>52</sup> Kosher filters were invented to be downloaded onto smartphones in order to limit their capacity. Flip phones are still seen as the better and more pious option for Hasids, but smartphones are sometimes required for jobs. Fader gives the example of a child being held in school offices until their parents agree to download a kosher filter onto their phone.<sup>53</sup> Schools are able to exert control over the wider community by determining what sort of technology, and filters to information on the internet, are accessible.

In 2005, in Lakewood, NJ, a majority Haredi city, "the community banned students enrolled in any of Lakewood's 43 yeshivas from having computers at home".<sup>54</sup> While this

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, and 169.

<sup>52</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Stein, Micah. "At Citi Field Sunday, Ultra-Orthodox Jews Will Rally Against the Internet." *Tablet Magazine*, May 2012, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/rallying-against-the-internet>.



succeeded at mitigating computer use at home, “a year after the ban was instituted, the Lakewood Public Library reported a 40 percent increase in computer use at its branches, fueled mainly by ultra-Orthodox Jews”.<sup>55</sup> When the Rabbis in this community wanted to change the standard for technology usage in their community, they used their schools in order to institute policies that the students and their families must follow at home.

In the last two years, access to technology has significantly changed. With Covid-19 limiting the ability of learning and childcare to happen in person, many schools and communities had to adopt technology in order to maintain their lifestyles. Based on a virtual panel I attended discussing the impact of Covid-19 on technological use in the Haredi world, the response of schools and communities was yet another debate and indicator of the religiosity of the different sects of Hasidism. Some schools had their children call into class on their parents' flip phones and made very little allowance for technology. Other schools used Zoom and gave out kosher filtered tablets that could only access Zoom. Some schools allowed every child to have a phone in order to call into class.<sup>56</sup> The aftermath of this is yet to be known, but what is known is that kids in this generation have had far more access to technology and secular information than kids of other generations. Schools at this time have been recollecting the technology they have given out, but the desire for technology in Hasidic communities has grown significantly since access has been more available.<sup>57</sup>

Parents, additionally, had to use more technology for their jobs, to call their families who they could no longer see in person, and to learn about the news of the pandemic. Equally, parents

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Shapiro, Eli, et al. “Adjusting to The Day After: Children’s Tech.” *Mishpacha Magazine*, 1 July 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

are no longer as willing to give up their access to this technology. Internet magazines, videos, podcasts, self help groups on Zoom have connected Hasidic communities in new ways than were previously impossible.<sup>58</sup> Schools are attempting to exert their control on the impact of secular technology, but they are having a more difficult time reaching a decision while the world is in flux. Significantly, technology and Zoom have become spaces for conversations about the effectiveness of the Haredi school system, a conversation that threatens the current way that borders are managed. Because schools needed to continue teaching through the pandemic, their new relationship and allowance of technology opened up a new forum for Haredi communities to share ideas.

As ongoing debates continue with the advent of more secular infiltration in Hasidic communities, schools are continuing to be the site of these debates. School administrations consult with rebbes to make decisions, and these decisions are disseminated through the community. Schools have a large degree of power in Hasidic communities because they have the ability to require a minimum amount of religious devotion from the entire family in order for children to attend. The way that Hasidic schools function additionally impacts families because everyone must agree to home/school continuity. The school is one of the most powerful sites of authority and policing in the Hasidic world.

Schools are crucial for the management of Hasidic communities. They are a central place in the community and they affect all community members. Schools teach children the fundamental lessons of how to be a Hasidic child. They teach that a normal child is one who adheres to Hasidic laws and practices. Children are taught that they are special as Jews because

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<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, Eli. "How Will Our Children's Relationship with Technology Be Reshaped by the Coronavirus?" *Mishpacha Magazine*, 20 May 2020.

they can fight off evil inclinations, a skill that Gentiles cannot possess. The central tenet of freedom that is taught is the freedom of knowing what freedoms one should not want to have. Therefore, children only earn freedom through knowing that freedom is limited to Hasidic moral boundaries. They are taught that modesty and restraint are the values that will bring them physical rewards as children and spiritual rewards as they grow older. Children are taught fulfillment through the fundamental values of Hasidic society. The schools that taught them these values will continue to monitor their behavior throughout their life as they become parents and send their children to school. Additionally, the school is the main site for Hasidic debates and new decisions to be made and disseminated into the community. Schools are the main enforcers and monitors of religious expectations in Hasidic communities.

Ayala Fader and Nathaniel Deutch with Michael Caspar argue in their research that in order for Hasidic communities to succeed and survive in the United States, they must remain very insular and in control of their institutions and communities, but also they must learn how to master secular society for their benefit. Deutch and Caspar explain how Hasidic communities created a home in New York City and managed to thrive as an insular religious group in the middle of a powerful secular city. They argue that this was done by delegitimizing all other ways of life and using Satmar institutions to create the standards for living. Additionally, Deutch and Caspar explain all of the ways that the Satmar leadership work with the secular government in order to secure their homes and resources. This work significantly illustrates that the Satmar community, one of the most religiously stringent and spratist Hasidic communities, deliberately decided that to survive, they had to remain insular in all of the ways that they could, but master secular politics in all the ways that would benefit them. This shows that all Hasidic communities

allow some secular influence, and therefore, must develop a site of control for how much of the secular world can come into their lives. Fader highlights the role of schools in her work on raising children in the Bobover community, and I use that research to explain how schools manage this risk of allowing secular culture in. In this chapter, I use *A Fortress in Brooklyn* and *Mitzvah Girls* to explain that all Hasidic communities cannot function as solely insular, and therefore, schools are one of the central institutions for monitoring this boundary, and making sure the communities stay as insular as they can.

In the next chapters, I will discuss the response of Haredi communities to those who struggle with this system of monitoring in schools, causing them to experiment more with the boundaries.

## Chapter Two: Covid-19's Effect on Haredi Access to Technology

In the last few years, the Haredi community has faced an interesting new challenge in terms of their connection to secular technology. Facing the challenge of disrupted lives, work, and school throughout an ongoing pandemic, Haredi groups were forced to welcome more technology into their communities than ever before. How much technology they allowed into their communities varied. For more 'liberal' sects of the Haredi world, Zoom and the internet became important tools much as they did for the rest of the world. What began as a means for maintaining normal lives in times of Covid, eventually allowed for the advent of new forms of communication and an outlet for parents with troubles that might otherwise have been handled inside the community.

While blogs have long played a role at the edge of the Haredi world, in the last two years, podcasts have become a new medium to discuss similar topics.<sup>59</sup> Blogs allowed for a safe and anonymous space for people questioning their faith to find community and explore new ideas. These podcasts add something more: while they still allow for anonymous participation, they provide a forum for exchange, a place to share, if just to see others in a room facing similar struggles. Many topics are discussed, the most popular, based on views after the show and live participants, include *shalom bayis*, or how to create a peaceful home, and *chinuch*, or how to raise and educate your child in a Jewish way. These topics, with their safe-sounding allusions to core elements of *yiddishkeit*<sup>60</sup>, allow for people – including, particularly women -- to get help for

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<sup>59</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press, 2020. In *Hidden Heretics*, Ayala Fader describes that blogs and digital forums became a place for those questioning their religion to discuss and share their experiences. These podcasts are less direct in their discussion, but often help parents of those struggling with their faith, and allow them to share their experiences helping their children.

<sup>60</sup> Meaning literally to live a Jewish life, but often refers to an Orthodox tradition and evokes images of shtetl culture.

things they may have previously felt ashamed about, such as marriage problems or raising children who are struggling with their faith.

The podcast I have focused on is “Let’s Get Real with Coach Menachem”, hosted by Menachem Bernfeld and moderated by Usher Parnes. It was started in May 2020 and describes its purpose as a weekly *shiur*<sup>61</sup> on Zoom with rotating guests speaking on different important topics in the *Frum*<sup>62</sup> world. This podcast, as well as many other internet resources for Haredi Jews stem from Lakewood, New Jersey, despite the fact that some of the strongest anti-internet activism in Haredi communities also originated in the same community.<sup>63</sup> What started as a way for people to more easily learn together and communicate during covid, turned into a resource that has been met with great success and community participation.

This platform is unique in its interactive nature. Not only can community members talk with each other like they can on blogs, but they can ask leaders and professionals questions. In a conversation I had with the host, Menachem Bernfeld, he explained that the guests he has on the podcast often participate in other online activity. Their voice on the podcast is special, however, in that with each guest, “you can actually come to his dining room, you get to see him, and you get to ask; it becomes real”.<sup>64</sup> Bernfeld suggests that the ability to interact elevates this platform. He continued, explaining that “the most important thing is validation” and that even those who are too embarrassed to ask their questions live, will reach out to speakers afterwards or hear

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<sup>61</sup> Jewish lesson

<sup>62</sup> Orthodox

<sup>63</sup> Stein, Micah. “At Citi Field Sunday, Ultra-Orthodox Jews Will Rally Against the Internet.” *Tablet Magazine*, May 2012, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/rallying-against-the-internet>. In 2012, Haredi Rabbis organized an anti internet rally at Citi Field. This rally sold out 40,000 seats, more watched live streamed, and only men were allowed to be in attendance. Many of the organizers of this rally were Rabbis from Lakewood, NJ. As I mention in Chapter 1, in 2005, Lakewood banned all students enrolled in any of their 43 yeshivas from having computers at home.

<sup>64</sup> Menachem Bernfeld. Zoom Interview. 2 May 2022.

someone else asking a question that mirrors their experiences.<sup>65</sup> Interaction makes this online platform unlike any that have previously existed.

It is impossible to know exactly how large the typical audience is for the podcast, but there is evidence that it reaches thousands, between the real-time participants and those who follow it on other media. It is clear that the range of participants – speakers and listeners -- is vast, though predominantly Haredi. Many hundreds of people join the calls at the time they happen and many watch them live on other platforms. For example, each recording receives thousands of views on youtube, and the podcast is on platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify where it amasses listeners. Importantly, it is even possible to call into the podcast live on Zoom, something hundreds of listeners do, or call into a number to listen to the recording without having internet access. This is crucial for participation in Haredi communities as it allows for anonymity and access in stricter sects that do not allow internet usage. This makes it impossible to know exactly how large the audience is for a typical podcast, but it is clear that it reaches a wide audience.

With an audience this wide, it is additionally difficult to know who exactly is listening, though the identifiable participants are disproportionately women and almost entirely Haredi. I asked Usher Parnes, the moderator of the podcast, who the intended audience for the *shiurim* were and I received the response, “all types of Jewish people”. Based on my observations and the range of organizations affiliated with the podcast, “all types of Jewish people” truly means all types of Orthodox Jewish people, the majority being Ultra-Orthodox. This podcast is played on theyeshiva.net which is an online Chabbad Yeshiva. It is also affiliated with the *Mishpacha*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

magazine which claims its goal is to exchange ideas and values through the Orthodox world, including “Hasidic, Yeshivish, Sephardic, and Modern Orthodox”.<sup>66</sup>

In the Zoom calls, most participants keep their cameras off, but many offer a glimpse when they enter the call. Their dress reflects varying levels of religiosity.<sup>67</sup> On one end of this spectrum is the more strict and insular, or Hasidic, community. Men often wear suits with long coats, black hats on normal days and *shtraimels*, fur hats, for special occasions; they have *peyos*, or side curls, and long beards. Women cover their hair, sometimes with a short wig and other times with a head scarf; they dress modestly with dark colored long skirts and tights, and wear full coverage tops. This is consistent with the range of dress within the Haredi world. On the other end of this spectrum is the Litvish, or Yeshivish, community. In this group, men will wear shorter suits or white button down shirts, a *kippah*, and have shorter *peyos* or none at all. Women will likely still have their hair covered in these communities, but may have longer wigs. They also might wear more colorful and flashier clothing that would be considered immodest in stricter communities.<sup>68</sup> The continuum of dress exists within these communities as well, not just between them, in more minute details, often more easily shown by the women’s dress. This spectrum has helped me classify both the speakers and participants.

The range is borne out by the language spoken by participants, as well. As Ayala Fader notes, Yiddish, Yiddish expressions and even Yiddish accent or grammar are conscious tools of

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<sup>66</sup> “About Us.” *Mishpacha Magazine*, <https://mishpacha.com/about-us/>.

<sup>67</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

This is written about in detail regarding women in Ayala Fader’s book, *Mitzvah Girls*. Additionally, I have corresponded with her regarding the organizations and resources I am focusing on and she has helped me categorize them based on the spectrum I describe here.

<sup>68</sup> Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 158.



marked separation in the Haredi world. The speakers in these fora are speaking primarily English, but unabashedly infused with Yiddish and Hebrew in a strong Ashkenazi pronunciation.<sup>69</sup>

The presence of Chabad Hasidim in these more ‘liberal’ settings is less surprising. As a Hasidic sect that is known for their proselytizing practices and large numbers of converts, they are not as isolated from the secular community.

Each session is moderated by Usher Parnes and hosted by Menachem Bernfeld. Parnes introduces the topic and the guests and will field audience questions. Bernfeld is a life coach and takes on a more advice giving role. He asks the guests questions and often will participate in the discussions with the guests. Bernfeld and Parnes are both from Lakewood, New Jersey. This is an Orthodox city and it is the second fastest growing municipality in the state.<sup>70</sup> Lakewood holds the second largest Yeshiva in the world which follows in a Lithuanian Haredi tradition.<sup>71</sup> Both Bernfeld and Parnes attended Haredi yeshivot, but both have experience with work and certifications in the secular world. Parnes holds a job as a marketing executive in a furniture store, a job outside of a traditional Yiddish community.<sup>72</sup> Bernfeld received his masters degree from a secular university, but works as a guidance counselor in a Yeshiva.<sup>73</sup> As suggested by Usher Parnes’s response to me, the organizers of the podcast appear intentional in their effort to avoid specific identification with a Jewish sect. However, the podcast often refers to listeners and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> February 18, Gabby Deutch. “Inside New Jersey’s Orthodox Boomtown.” *Jewish Insider*, 18 Feb. 2022.

<sup>71</sup> “BMG - Beth Medrash Govoa - Lakewood Yeshiva.” *Beth Medrash Govoha*, <https://www.bmg.edu>.

<sup>72</sup> According to Parnes’s Linkdin, he works for Modway, a furniture store. While it is a secular job employing many secular people, and working for a secular market, almost all senior jobs belong to people holding Yiddish names. The owner and CEO went to the Rabbinical College of America. While he does work in the secular world, it is still positioned in a Yiddish community.

<sup>73</sup> *Menachem Bernfeld - Certified Life Coach - NexStep Education | LinkedIn*.

guests as *Frum* or *Following Yiddishkeit*, both of which suggest that the audience is at the minimum, Orthodox, and more likely, Haredi or Ultra-Orthodox.

Their podcast is conducted in English, but Yiddish is intermingled seamlessly into their speech. This language suggests that the two of them are Ultra-Orthodox and that the podcast is aimed at a similar audience. Their dress points to Bernfeld and Parnes as specifically Litvish, in this spectrum of Orthodox. Both wear *Kippot* and suits to all of the calls, but have shorter beards, do not wear black hats or *shtreimels*, and do not have visible *peyos*. Often, the speakers are in this same category, dress similarly, and have secular degrees and certifications. When speakers are more Hasidic, they are almost always shown wearing a *shtreimel* on the promotion poster.<sup>74</sup> The more Litvish men often look more modern and have their degree or certification listed next to their name.<sup>75</sup> The audience has a large range, but all whose cameras are on, are firmly in the Haredi continuum. Many people enter the Zoom with anonymous names such as “Zoom user” or their initials. Those whose names are shown, are mostly Yiddish names.<sup>76</sup> Most of the women’s hair is covered, either by a wig or by a scarf, but I have spotted at least one woman without covered hair. The men are all in *Kippot* or hats, some have *peyos* and a long beard, some have a short beard, and some have neither.<sup>77</sup> These observations are all consistent with the range of language and dress existing in the Haredi community.

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<sup>74</sup> See Image 1

<sup>75</sup> See Image 2

<sup>76</sup> I am classifying Yiddish names here by names commonly used in Haredi communities. Examples I have seen include, “Adina”, “Chaya”, “Shlomo”, etc.

<sup>77</sup> All of this research has been done by attending the Zoom calls for the Coach Menachem Shiruim. I have made observations of the people who have joined the calls and I have worked on classifying who is in the Zoom room based on their appearance, names, and ability to understand the language spoken on the calls.

#93

**LET'S GET REAL**

**Sunday Nights with Coach Menachem & Friends**

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Image 1.<sup>78</sup>

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Understanding the Impact

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Image 2.<sup>79</sup>

If the audience is primarily Haredi, it is probably not composed of a significant number of Hasids from communities that are more rigid in their rejection of the internet. Even the new Covid openness does not extend deeply into groups like the Satmars, based on their lack of representation in internet forums, as well as the fact that they are less accepting of secular information and culture in all arenas. They continue to lack access to the internet and other secular media. In addition, English fluency and openness to secular expertise may be more limited. Nevertheless, the fact that these podcasts can also be called into by telephone allows for the possibility that other, more isolated Haredi individuals would access them.

<sup>78</sup> Image 1. Promotion poster from *Let's Get Real with Coach Menachem* showing a Hasidic guest speaker in a Shtreimel. Sourced from: Parnes, Usher. Message to Anna Stewart. *Whatsapp*. 28 Feb. 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Image 2. Promotional poster from *Let's Get Real with Coach Menachem* showing Orthodox guests with their certifications listed next to their names. Sourced from: Parnes, Usher. *Facebook*. 17 Oct. 2021.

In a conversation that I had with Menachem Bernfeld, he explained that the option to call into the podcast has allowed for more stringent and separatist community members to join. “Some [people] call in by phone, I know I have an audience in New Square<sup>80</sup>... and that’s interesting because those people are usually very secluded.... I have an audience in Williamsburg and they are also ‘Ultra’[Orthodox]”.<sup>81</sup> Unlike blogs, online magazines, or other previously available resources, the access of this podcast is significant. It provides an option for people in the most stringently Orthodox groups to hear new ideas without needing internet access.

All of this suggests that these podcasts reach a wide range of primarily Haredi people, that there is a great deal of interest from within that Haredi community, and that for many it is possible to access the podcasts without betraying the community. Similarly to Ayala Fader’s work, this is a community that I, and other outsiders, can have access to based on their larger relationship with the secular world. Additionally, it is a community that is willing to be impacted and draw from Modern Orthodox groups. This is similar to Ayala Fader’s research that states that the Bobover community will hire Modern Orthodox teachers in their schools or as counselors at their camps. This is in stark contrast with the Satmar community which worked to delegitimize all other forms of Jewish practice, other than Hasidism. Differently from Fader’s work, it is not possible for me to know with certainty which community is affected by these resources.

The podcasts which receive the most attention are those about parenting struggling children. Recently, on December 19, 2021, a podcast was released which reached the maximum limit of people on Zoom at 1,000 participants. At 17,000 views, it has the most views of any of their podcasts on youtube. These numbers do not include those who listened to it live streamed,

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<sup>80</sup> New Square is the home of the Skver community, a very stringent Hasidic group. This community is referenced in Chapter 1 as the community Shulem Deem wrote his memoir about leaving.

<sup>81</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem. Zoom Interview. 2 May 2022.

on a podcast provider such as Apple or Spotify, or those who called in afterwards. This *shiur* ran for 3 hours and was on the topic, “Why are so many teenagers struggling today”.<sup>82</sup> The guests on this *shiur* were Rabbi YY Jacobson and Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW. Rabbi Jacobson is the *Rosh Yeshiva*<sup>83</sup> at the theyeshiva.net and teaches online classes on marriage and parenthood. Rabbi Russell is a practicing therapist who lives and works in Israel. He has a private practice where he works with orthodox families through issues with parenting and marriage. Rabbi YY Jacobson is a part of the Chabbad community. Rabbi Shimon Russell does not mention an affiliation, but is likely closer to the Litvish end of the continuum given his dress and degree. Regardless of the affiliation of the speakers, they give advice to a *Frum* community and they follow a common structure for their lectures.

This *shiur*, as well as all of the others I have listened to, functioned in a very specific format. First, Usher Parnes and Menachem Bernfeild introduce the topic and the speakers. The speakers then give a lecture on the topic, many times starting with biblical stories or references and lessons from biblical Judaism. For example, in this podcast, Rabbi YY Jacobson explains that the only *Tzadik*<sup>84</sup> introduced in the Torah without a biography is *Avraham Avinu*.<sup>85</sup> “There is not a single word justifying *Hashem*’s<sup>86</sup> choice of Avraham Avinu as the first Jew”.<sup>87</sup> This is a question posed by the *Rambam*.<sup>88</sup> A suggested answer by the *Mahara*<sup>89</sup> is that there is no biography so as to not give the impression “that only a Jew who lives up to a certain bio[graphy]

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<sup>82</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*.

<sup>83</sup> Head of Yeshiva

<sup>84</sup> A righteous person

<sup>85</sup> Meaning Father Abraham. The biblical patriarch of the Jewish people.

<sup>86</sup> Meaning literally, “The Name”, it is used as a reference to God.

<sup>87</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*, 37:25

<sup>88</sup> Also known as Maimodidies, a Jewish philosopher and prolific Torah Scholar.

<sup>89</sup> Also known as Judah Loew ben Bezalel, he was an important Torah Scholar in Prague.

is someone who *Hashem* loves infinitely and chooses”.<sup>90</sup> This story is used to bridge a biblical world and justify a modern problem of children not feeling good enough in schools because they do not reach a certain standard. Rabbi Jacobson is suggesting that the bible intentionally demonstrates that God loves those who achieve, as well as those who do not.

After the biblical stories, this leads into where more secular subjects and methods can be introduced, such as secular psychologists like Erik Erikson, or secular mental health models such as the DSM. When speaking of these secular topics and scientific or psychological explanations, the speaker always explains how this is congruent with religious life. God and science are told to go together because science simply explains why God made people a certain way.<sup>91</sup> When the speakers address an issue in the Haredi world, specifically schooling, they always give the context first that they love the system, they believe it is crucial to everyone’s well-being to be involved in this system, and that they only criticize because they want to make their communities stronger. For example, in the podcast on Struggling Teens, Rabbi Russell goes to great lengths to explain that he does not criticize the chinuch system because he doesn’t believe in it, but because he wants to make it stronger. He states,

“I don’t want to be misunderstood... if we love something enough, then we ought to be healthy enough to give it constructive criticism to make it better... I don’t think we would take the risk to have conversations like this, if not for the fact that we love the system so much and we want to see it do better, and we know it can”.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of a school for struggling boys when talking about his work on the Coach Menachem podcast gave a disclaimer before speaking. He said, “I am not here, *Chas*

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<sup>90</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*, 37:35.

<sup>91</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi Shais Taub. *A Surprising Truth About the Problems That Plague Us*.

<sup>92</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*, 41:02.

*v'Shalom*<sup>93</sup> to bash the system in any way. *Baruch Hashem*<sup>94</sup> we have a great chinuch system, we have a yeshiva system that has been working".<sup>95</sup> Despite the fact that his job centers around helping children who the Yeshiva system does not work for, this disclaimer was a major piece of his introduction to the podcast. This explanation happens in all podcasts where criticisms of the community are given a forum, and seems to be crucial for the acceptance and comfort of the community. It allows for questions and discussions without threatening the existence of the system.

After the speaker's lectures, questions are taken from the live Zoom audience. Questions are sent in beforehand so the moderator can decide the order of questions and which ones to take. While the audience seems to be made up mostly of women, specifically mothers, if there are men with questions, they usually go first. Additionally, there has never been a guest speaker on the podcast who is a woman. On this podcast, as well as others, the questions about children generally center around how to help a troubled teen, and almost invariably involve a tension with their experiences at school. There appears to be a bright line, however, between 'normal' problems and children who are 'off the *derech*'<sup>96</sup> or at risk of leaving the community. As discussed below, for Rabbi Shimon Russell, 20% of kids thrive in school, 60% muddle through and 20% are at risk. But while muddling through is normal, going 'off the *derech*' is pathological. He claims that of those who go off the *derech*, 80% have been sexually abused.<sup>97</sup> Many other prominent speakers and self-help blogs additionally claim that the main reason for going off the

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<sup>93</sup> God Forbid

<sup>94</sup> Thank God

<sup>95</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem. *Parenting Struggling Teens with Rabbi Sender Y. Kasziner and Dr. Yossi Shafer PhD*, 24:05.

<sup>96</sup> Meaning off the path, refers to people who leave Ultra-Orthodoxy.

<sup>97</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi Shais Taub. *A Surprising Truth About the Problems That Plague Us*.

derech is abuse, and not parenting issues. This, therefore, does not fit into the self-help topics discussed, as it is outside of the parenting abilities and chinuch system if a child is abused.

For example, on this podcast about struggling teens, one parent did ask a question about children who ‘go off the *derech*’. This question was swiftly addressed and dismissed by Rabbi Shimon Russell. He first stated that the speakers and moderators had agreed to not go into the topic of those who leave, and instead, to focus on the 60%. However, he quickly addresses the question by saying, “kids who go off [the *derech*] have experienced trauma and trauma disconnects you... kids don’t go off [the *derech*] because of philosophy, the philosophy comes afterwards”.<sup>98</sup> Rabbi Russell is claiming here that when speaking about the 20% who leave *Yiddishkeit*, it is a completely different issue that has nothing to do with their personal beliefs in the community, but instead, is an issue of trauma stemming from the experience of abuse which makes them feel unsafe in the system. This topic is so taboo, that on a popular blog for *Frum* women, you have to be accepted into a private group after posting a certain amount of times in order to see and participate in the forum about children who have left.<sup>99</sup> The podcast aims to help people with issues within the community, but the topic of those who leave is not one that is addressed publicly.

On this specific podcast, Rabbi Russell explains his theory of children who struggle, starting firstly with his breakdown of who it happens to. He gives an overall explanation of the kids growing up in the broader “yeshiva world”. Russell recognizes three groups of children: about 20% who come out of their Yeshiva schooling as fantastic products of the system, on the other end, there are 20% of kids who do not make it, or who seriously consider leaving, which is

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<sup>98</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*. 1:33:13

<sup>99</sup> From the *Imamother* blog, a blog for “married and once married Jewish women”.



largely due to the earlier discussed trauma that pushes them off, and in the middle there are 60% of kids.<sup>100</sup> This middle group, according to Russell, comes out dressing and acting the part of *Frum*, but struggling with their own feelings of success. He says that this 60% feel that they were “at best, tolerated” by the system, but that they were not those who conjured feelings of pride. This means that 60% of the community is struggling with their place in Haredi society, as they are questioning their ability to succeed within it. This group does not include those who question to a point of leaving, just those who struggle with their place in their community.

In another speech by Rabbi Russell, he explains that this feeling of not having success in school is particularly detrimental for *Frum* children. This is not only because, as he states, that children not being inspired by the *mitzvos* of the Torah is a tragedy, but also because school is central to the experience of an orthodox child. As I explained in great detail in the previous chapter, schools create the rules and set the expectations for the rest of the community. Therefore, Russell explains that when a child does not succeed at school, it creates great trauma because they feel as though they are not succeeding as a member of their community.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, a secular kid who isn't good at academic subjects could become an artist or an athlete. A religious child does not have a second choice for success. School teaches religious children how to be members of their community, how to live an Orthodox life. Russell estimates that trauma around learning in religious schools affects 60% of the school age population, making graduates question their faith, leading to a staggering problem for the community. A majority of community members questioning their place as an Orthodox Jew due to issues in pedagogy and

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Taub, Rabbi Shais, and Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW. *The Uniqueness of “Learning Trauma.”*

schooling, Russell argues, creates “push outs, not drop outs”.<sup>102</sup>

Additionally, a study conducted in 2012 at Israeli Yeshivot found that the Yeshivot were facing a crisis of dropouts and people leaving the community in favor of occupational training and the labor market.<sup>103</sup> Yohai Hakak and Tamar Rapoport, the authors of this research, found that men in Yeshivot are taught that their highest aspiration is to be an amazing Torah scholar. When they are not the best in their classes or appreciated for their work, they feel distressed and are moved to the fringes of society because they question their place within it. The solution Hakak and Rapoport found Yeshivot employing is the change in rhetoric around what it means to succeed as a Torah scholar. Rabbis discourage the comparison of students with each other and suggest, instead, that “a man’s spiritual rewards do not depend on the relation between his achievements and those of others”.<sup>104</sup> These Yeshivot are attempting to change the idea that when a man is not naturally a great Torah scholar, that he is failing at what should be his aspirations in life. Instead, this rhetoric suggests that what is shown as earthly success, is not necessarily what determines spiritual reward. Therefore, all men have the chance to succeed by working hard, not only by being in what Rabbi Shimon Russell would suggest is the top 20% of Haredi communities. This change in rhetoric is used to change the learning trauma that occurs for many Orthodox students, by removing the equivalence of succeeding in school with being appreciated and belonging members of Haredi society.

Rabbi Shimon Russell has theorized that Haredi communities are reaching a turning point

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<sup>102</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*.

<sup>103</sup> Hakak, Yohai, and Tamar Rapoport. “Excellence or Equality in the Name of God? The Case of Ultra-Orthodox Enclave Education in Israel.” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 92, no. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 251–76. *JSTOR*, 261.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 267-268.

in their history, and therefore, their chinuch system that creates these “push outs” must change with the changing times. Russell argues that early in American Haredi history, the chinuch system was created to recover from the Holocaust.<sup>105</sup> As discussed in Chapter one, concerted efforts were made by Haredi communities to recover from the threat of the Holocaust. This is the dominant narrative of Haredi life in the aftermath of the Holocaust. For the Satmars, this meant undermining all other religious systems and creating a singular accepted way of life. This was done intentionally so as to not recreate the threat of the extinction of Judaism by avoiding religious contamination and assimilation.<sup>106</sup> In this system, the community was placed before the individual in order to ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

In this context, Russell is calling on Haredi Jews to break with the ideology that has brought them to this point. Now that the threat of survival has passed, the system can now focus on the needs of the individual.<sup>107</sup> Russell even goes further to suggest that the trauma of the past and the measures which the community has taken for survival are harming relations between parents and children. Three generations after the Holocaust, children are greatly affected by the trauma that their parents and grandparents experienced. As a result of this trauma, parents often have a hard time showing love. Instead, they show fear and over protective care as a remnant from Holocaust experiences.<sup>108</sup> Even the best intentioned members of the community, teachers and mentors, will continue to push children out by not showing them love. At this point in time, Rabbi Shimon Russell argues that the system led by trauma in the wake of the Holocaust needs

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Deutsch, Nathaniel, and Michael Casper. *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg*. Yale University Press, 2021, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*.

<sup>108</sup> Taub, Rabbi Shais, and Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW. *The Uniqueness of “Learning Trauma.”*

to be changed if the community is to continue to thrive and grow.

There are many ways that religious leaders are working to change the education system in order to serve more children and keep people involved in the community. Listening to this podcast and reading articles from *Mishpacha* Magazine has led me to discover an ‘ecosystem’ of resources for parents of struggling children. This includes this podcast along with other self help podcasts<sup>109</sup>, many organizations aimed at counseling and connecting parents<sup>110</sup>, and blogs where parents can crowdsource advice from others in the same situation.

Both Rabbi Jacobson and Rabbi Russell, as well as many other prominent Rabbis and mental health professionals, work closely with an organization called Keshar Nafshi. Keshar Nafshi is an organization founded in 2017 that hosts bi yearly Shabbatons<sup>111</sup> for parents of children struggling with their connection to *Yiddishkeit*. These weekends are for parents to make connections with others going through similar experiences, and they are filled with many experts giving addresses on the topic of how to help these kids. The last Shabbaton hosted 800 parents “hail[ing] from every community – Chassidish, Litvish, Yeshivish, and Sephardic”.<sup>112</sup> The need in the Haredi world is clearly very high for services and support for parents of children struggling with *Yiddishkeit* and their traditions.

The solution produced in these spaces is that children need to be treated as individuals, rather than as a member of a community. This solution goes against previous generations of thought around how Haredi communities should thrive.

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<sup>109</sup> Many of the people involved in the *Coach Menachem* podcast, will go onto other self help podcasts or run ones of their own. These include podcasts such as *Twisted Parenting* with Avi Fishoff, *Soulwords* with Rabbi Shais Taub, and *Take Two* with Yisroel Besser.

<sup>110</sup> Rabbi Shimon Russell is on the board of an organization called “Fresh Start” aimed at helping men and women understand and overcome their past trauma and abuse.

<sup>111</sup> Weekend trips over Shabbat

<sup>112</sup> Goldstein, Zalman. “800 Parents of Struggling Teens Attend Shabbaton of ‘Chizuk.’” *COLlive*, 8 Jan. 2022.

It is obvious by the sheer numbers of participants in Keshet Nafshi, as well as attendees and listeners of the Coach Menachem podcasts on parenting, that many Haredi children are struggling with the system they are being brought up in. Many researchers have described the strictness of the techniques for raising children to be Haredi, as well as the isolation and separatism inherent in Haredi life. Using newly formed organizations and media resources, I am attempting to uncover how the community responds when large numbers of participants struggle with this way of life. The stories that I have heard through these platforms illustrate the fact that the system of education that is so central to creation of a fulfilled Haredi community as well to the policing of the boundaries between religious and secular, is not working in a striking number of cases. This new school of thought suggests that this is a crucial time for Haredi communities to change. With the allowance of new forms of technology and arenas for communication, ideas are being spread by experts faster and wider through Ultra-Orthodox communities than before. These ideas largely suggest changing the system that has been the standard for generations.

The system that is currently in place protects the community before the individual. This is perpetuated in schools with strict rules as to how children and their families can interact with the secular world around them. Additionally, it is done to indoctrinate generations of children into a belief system so that they will continue to practice it throughout their life. All of this is a community minded attempt for Haredi communities to continue to survive and grow post the threat of the Holocaust. At this time, however, experts are suggesting that this strict system must change in order to keep Haredi people involved in the community. These experts are suggesting that this system can traumatize those involved, causing them to question their beliefs and place within the Haredi world. What must change, therefore, is a blanket approach to what each person

and child is allowed to access and do in their community. Instead, it is suggested that each person should be treated according to their individual needs. In order to stop the trauma that is causing children to question their place in society, strict boundaries must be bent and changed and a new system has to be created.

### Chapter Three: Online Platforms as a Site of Haredi Border Debates

The advent of new online Haredi resources has created a platform for community members to discuss their previously private problems in a public space with others who have similar struggles. As I discuss in the previous chapter, the resources most utilized by the community, by striking numbers, are those created to help parents of children struggling with their faith and connection to *Yiddishkeit*. What emerges in this setting can be seen as a dramatic challenge to the standard narrative of how Hasidic communities survived after the Holocaust. Trained therapists and rabbis are telling a community that has been built on placing the needs of the group over that of the individual that the current crisis requires the opposite solution. For the “60%” of youth who struggle with their place in Orthodox communities – not to mention the 20% who may be threatening to go 'off the *derech*', the solution is to place the individual's needs over the community.

Rabbi Shimon Russell states on the *Coach Menachem* podcast, that the leaders of the American Ultra-Orthodox “were concerned about the survival of *Klal Yisroel*”<sup>113</sup>, they were not concerned about the survival of the individual... That same system that provided for recovery has to move, has to shift, if it’s going to provide for continuity”.<sup>114</sup> He suggests a radical shift in the system that would change the intentionally community minded approach to one that places the individual first. In this chapter, I will be exploring the discourse happening and the advice given in the online fora. Instead of community wide rules on where and how the borders with the secular world lie, the facilitators describe the advantages of a system in which individuals would have their own relationship to and allowances within the secular world. In these examples, many

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<sup>113</sup> Term meaning “Jewish people”

<sup>114</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*, 50:00.

Rabbis, therapists, educators and community members are all joining together on online platforms to share their ideas. While these notions may have existed before these platforms were created, what is revolutionary is that the internet has enabled a forum where people are participating in large numbers, in real time, sharing and supporting each other.

Kesher Nafshi, an organization that hosts Shabbatons for parents whose children are struggling with the system, attempts to make the Haredi community stronger by pulling those who are struggling back into their families. The organization was created by a parent who, as he explained, had to learn how to accept his struggling child the way that she was. Rabbi Gedallia Miller is a Bobover Hasid whose child began to have a crisis of faith and resisting religious observance.<sup>115</sup> In his shock and confusion, Rabbi Gedalia reached out for help for him and his wife, and found that only underground support networks existed for parents like him. Gedallia made it his mission to remove the shame involved in navigating this territory. Therefore, he created a support group for people struggling with their children's desires and actions.

Kesher Nafshi, as discussed in the prior chapter, has been very successful, garnering large numbers of people from many different Haredi backgrounds. Within the first four events, the organization had 2,000 participants, the last Shabbaton hosted 800 parents, and the upcoming Shabbaton is sold out.<sup>116</sup> Rabbi Gedallia suggests that "So many kids today are coming back because the parents are changing the way they're looking at their children, embracing them with love and understanding".<sup>117</sup> His goal is to give parents a network and expert facilitators to help them understand that their children will not come back if they are met with frustration and strict

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<sup>115</sup> Scarr, Cindy. "Still Our Children." *Mishpacha Magazine*, 13 July 2021.

<sup>116</sup> *Kesher Nafshi*, <https://keshernafshi.org/>.

<sup>117</sup> Scarr, Cindy. "Still Our Children." *Mishpacha Magazine*, 13 July 2021.



rules. Children will only come back into the community if they are given love and met where they are at. For Rabbi Gedallia's own child, his Rebbe recommended that he let go of his parental guilt for his daughter leaving, and instead, work on building back his relationship with her. This was significant for him and his daughter's future. She moved in with her parents and relied on their support at that time, and while she has not become *Frum* again, she is happy and healthy and still has a relationship with her parents and her past. She is an event planner, and even plans some of Keshet Nafshi's events. While she is not on the path they wanted her to be on, she is still involved in their community in ways that make her comfortable.

Rabbi Gedallia believes, and has founded his organization on the belief, that most children do not struggle with their faith out of rebellion, but because they have been hurt or suffered from trauma.<sup>118</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Two, this pathologizes those who leave the Haredi community and this line of thinking removes blame from parents, who might otherwise keep their struggles quiet. This allows parents to come together, support each other, and create a public network with streamlined methods and ways of thinking. The message supported by this forum is for parents in this situation to show love and understanding, rather than disappointment, with their children's questions and decisions. While showing understanding for the situation often means broadening the rules of the community or the home, this eventually creates children who feel comfortable returning to their homes and faith, not children who feel further pushed out and isolated.

Keshet Nafshi began in 2017 and has made a previously underground community more visible. Their events have garnered very large numbers and their message has reached many

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

people, but the numbers and accessibility of in-person events are far more limited than the potential numbers and accessibility of online fora. Since 2018, the organization has begun sharing event videos online. Their most viewed video on Youtube, of Rabbi Shimon Russell's address at 2020 Shabbaton, has just under 9,000 views.<sup>119</sup> This, alone, is more than the amount of people who attended their first four events in person. The advent of more online platforms with similar content has amplified their message and spread it to wide audiences.

Rabbi Shimon Russell, who is one of the expert facilitators for Keshar Nafshi, has appeared on many different online platforms to spread a message that challenges the history of favoring the community over the individual. He has stated that, "we have a system that was created to recover from the Holocaust. *Gedolei Yisroel*<sup>120</sup> clearly had a picture and a view... of recovery from the Holocaust, and in the recovery picture, it was obvious [to them] that putting the [community] first and the individual second was crucial".<sup>121</sup> Rabbi Russell claims that the chinuch system must now change to intentionally put individuals at the forefront.

In one example, Rabbi Russell explains how schools can change in order to support a system for individuals and their needs. He additionally explains the benefits he has already seen by walking the audience through changes he has made in Yeshivot. Rabbi Russell claims that students perform much better and are much happier with their education when they are given individual attention and help for their struggles. This is because they can see that authority figures care about their success for themselves, rather than being told that they need to change to

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<sup>119</sup> Keshar Nafshi. *R Shimon Russell - Understanding Your Child; The Pathway to Healing*. 2020. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4thVUYdynHI>.

<sup>120</sup> Supreme Rabbinical policy making council.

<sup>121</sup> Menachem Bernfeld, Rabbi Shimon Russell LCSW, Rabbi YY Jacobson. *Why Are So Many Teenagers Struggling Today*, 49:05.

better fit the expectations of the community.<sup>122</sup> He gives recommendations for how the chinuch system can change, not in its values, but in its practice in order to better benefit the majority of children, and therefore, keep them in the community. Boundaries and borders may be loosened in order to help individual needs, systems can be changed in their methodology, but the values of the Haredi community must remain intact. No one in this community suggests that the central tenets of an Ultra-Orthodox way of life are bad and in need of change, this distinction helps to define which ways borders can be changed, and which ways go too far.

Rabbi Russell has worked with schools to experiment with basic changes to address more individual needs. He claims that they greatly affect the participation and happiness of kids. He tells the story of how he implemented change around punishment for children showing up late to *davening*<sup>123</sup> in a yeshiva. Russell had the *Rosh Yeshiva* stand at the door, and as students show up, he thanks them for coming. The later they come, the *Rosh Yeshiva* explains how thankful he is that they have shown up to *daven*, despite their struggle to get there. Instead of punishment, he asks them how the school can help make it easier for the student to show up. This school saw an improvement in the students' involvement and after employing this technique, fewer kids continued showing up late.

Rabbi Russell additionally claims that trauma is the root cause of all issues of rebellion. These views reflect Rabbi Gedallia Miller's claims that trauma is at the root for those who leave. Rabbi Russell believes that teachers can change this pattern by showing love and support to individual needs, without taking blame for the situation at hand, because trauma is to blame. Additionally, as I mention in the previous chapter, Rabbi Russell claims that the Haredi Chinuch

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Praying

system causes the trauma that affects so many children. This is because Yeshiva education teaches the students how to be Jewish community members, and when they are met in that system with criticism, they come out questioning their place as an Orthodox Jew. Therefore, changing the Yeshiva system is crucial to the ability the school has to keep students as fulfilled members of the Haredi community.

The shift that this yeshiva made from community minded rules to individual attention had a positive impact on children's relationship with praying. What this shows is that, while the rules of the community and school are that everyone must pray in the morning, shifting the rules for individuals, had the impact of more people wanting to pray. While strict rules and boundaries for right and wrong work for some, this example demonstrates that the community actually thrives more when rules can be bent and changed for individuals.

In another of Coach Menachem's podcasts, "Parenting Struggling Teens", the guests include Rabbi Sender Y. Kasziner who is the *Rosh Yeshiva* of a Yeshiva aimed at keeping troubled boys within the chinuch system and Dr. Yossi Shafer, a therapist with his PhD in clinical psychology who grew up in the Haredi community, attending Yeshiva, and serves as a Haredi therapist.<sup>124</sup> This podcast has 1.2 thousand views on Youtube. It was the 13th podcast made and was the first about parenting kids struggling with *Yiddishkeit*. At the time, Menachem Bernfeld said that the emails coming into the podcast with questions for the *shiur* were overwhelming compared to other podcasts.

In this *shiur*, Dr. Safer tells the story of a 14 year old girl who wouldn't come home before midnight and her parents gave her an ultimatum of coming home earlier or being kicked

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<sup>124</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem. *Parenting Struggling Teens with Rabbi Sender Y. Kasziner and Dr. Yossi Shafer PhD*.

out. She eventually sees Dr. Shafer as a step before being kicked out. She admits to him that she has a tattoo she does not want her dad to see and she comes home late to avoid him, she uses marijuana, and she has a boyfriend. She also says that if Dr. Shafer shares this information with her father, she will move out of her house and in with her boyfriend. Dr. Shafer speaks to the father and says that for the night, he should let her come home late and then slowly ask her to come back earlier. At the time, the father expressed frustration with this answer because he did not understand that there was more he could not know and asked Dr. Shafer to go to his Rabbi for advice. The Rabbi agreed with Dr. Shafer and said that it was a matter of common sense, the girl could not move in with her boyfriend, and therefore her father could not know. With the Rabbi's consent, the father allowed his daughter to come home late the next night and she never moved in with her boyfriend. For three years, their relationship remained rocky and the girl continued to push boundaries and her father feared that he was doing the wrong thing letting her continue her behavior. Currently, however, the father knows everything about his daughter and they have a much better relationship.<sup>125</sup>

Dr. Shafer uses this story to illustrate how patient confidentiality is crucial to his practice and that many parents do not know the full extent of their children's struggles. What seems important to me in this story, however, is that the way to keep this girl in the community was not to make her follow the community's rules. What has kept this girl in the community was that the boundaries and expectations were loosened for her. This allowed her to slowly trust her therapist, her father, and eventually, allowed her to rejoin the community's expectations. If her father had followed through with his ultimatum, or if Dr. Shafer had lost her trust by telling her father what

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 9:50-22:10.

was happening and having him create strict rules for her, she would have moved out of her home and into her boyfriend's home at 14 years old. What kept her in the system was disregarding the system until she felt like she could trust her family and build a relationship with them. In this case, her therapist, father, and Rabbi all agreed together that the best way to help her was to not limit her exposure to the extent they would have liked. The best way to help this struggling teen was to meet her with compassion, allow her to push boundaries, and eventually bring her back to the community's expectations.

This idea is generally agreed upon by community members in public forums. For example, a popular blog used by Litvish and Modern Orthodox women called “Imamother” has many women asking questions about how to help their children. In one particular forum, posted on January 12, 2022, an anonymous woman posted about her 15 year old daughter struggling with *Yiddishkeit*. The woman explains that her daughter started feeling this way and talking about it slowly but she now obsesses about the day she can leave the community. She is not rebellious, but is deeply unhappy and speaks about her ideal world where she can dress how she would like and go to public school. This mother asked for advice from others, saying “What can I do? I don't want to force her to do anything. I just don't want her to be this miserable anymore”.<sup>126</sup>

This post received 37 responses, many of which suggested that the child has suffered abuse and that is why she is feeling this way. The original poster wrote explicitly where her child is all day and how she knows she has not been abused, but commenters continued suggesting that this is the root of the problem. Others, however, suggest allowing the girl leniency in religious boundaries. Many suggest to keep showing the girl love until she feels more comfortable

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<sup>126</sup> “Parenting ‘Derech Challenged’ Unhappy Teen” *Imamother: Connecting Frum Women*, 12 Jan. 2022, <https://www.imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=456829>.

opening up and confiding in her parents. Others recommend giving special allowances like missing school, watching a secular movie with her, or allowing her to go to a public school. Some even say that they experienced this themselves in their younger days and would have appreciated parents loosening their boundaries and allowing for exploration. Examples of these responses include:

“Let her know, if she wants, she can go to a more modern school. Or even public school.”

“Tell her you won't judge her for whatever you reads or watches”

“We were told in a somewhat similar situation to let go of the *yiddishkeit* for the moment so to speak and to focus on addressing the "unhappiness" to strengthen our connection with the teen out of love. And in fact that did work B"H<sup>127</sup>. The *yiddishkeit* came later on their own of their own initiative B"H.”

Responses from people who struggled in similar ways when they were teens include:

“My mother saw how unhappy I was and how I was struggling, and how I wanted to be “off”. She took me out of my BY type school and sent me to a more in-between type of school with a good mix of girls, including more modern ones, and that was a lot more lenient. She allowed me to be more relaxed with *tznius*<sup>128</sup>, but I still wore skirts and sleeves. She allowed me to talk to boys but in controlled settings. She gave me space to explore what I wanted and what I was comfortable with and I was so much happier all the way to the end of high school.”

“I wish my parents had acknowledged my misery and done some actions to address them. I probably would have benefited from changing to a less sheltered school, being around more open minded people and would've realized that you don't need to drop everything to enjoy life.”

“This was also very much me: I was lonely, I didn't feel I was "like" the other girls, nothing about school made me happy. I had not been abused, I was not gay, but I felt like I was trapped in a world that had nothing to offer me. I cried all the time, all the time. And then one summer in high school my parents found me an art class, three times a week, at a local college. Everything changed that summer. I discovered I could paint! I started painting all the time. I met other kids (albeit not *frum* kids) who loved painting and we painted together. FINALLY, friends like me and

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<sup>127</sup> Abbreviation for Baruch Hashem, meaning Thank God

<sup>128</sup> Modesty laws

a hobby that made me really happy and really excited. Ultimately I changed schools to a place that offered me more creative options, and I stopped crying.”

Not a single response suggests that the way to help this child is to double down on the strictness of the Haredi community. Every response either claims this is a situation of abuse, or that the child just needs to come to *Yiddishkeit* on her own. The answer to both of these issues, as suggested by community members using this forum, is to give the girl extra attention, show her love, and allow her to explore other options.

This forum post was recent and anonymous, therefore, the result of these actions has not been shared. Based on the responses of people who had similar situations growing up, however, this technique works. The participants in this blog are all Orthodox women and they all explain how being happier and exploring allowed them to return to their *Frum* community by their own choice. There are many other forums on this website that include questions similar to this one, and each of them has a comment section that mirrors this one. This suggests that the community widely believes that in order for struggling children to return to their faith, they must first be able to explore past the strict boundaries created by their schools, families, and communities.

The question that loosening the boundaries bears, is how loose can they get? Does this encourage larger numbers of people to leave? It is difficult to know exactly the numbers of who leaves versus who stays given that it is not recorded by communities or outside organizations. What is clear, however, is that Haredi communities are not at threat of extinction. In the 2020 Pew Research Survey of American Jews, it was found that Orthodox Judaism has the highest retention rate of different sects of Judaism, with “two-thirds of Americans raised as Orthodox still identif[ing] as Orthodox as adults”.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, Orthodox Judaism has a strikingly young

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<sup>129</sup> Jewish Americans in 2020.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, 11 May 2021.



population. “Some 17% of U.S. Jews ages 18 to 29 say they are Orthodox, compared with 3% of Jews ages 65 and older”.<sup>130</sup> Because of incredibly high birth rates, the Haredi population is growing at significant rates, as exemplified by the large numbers of young people in the community. Two Northeast cities with large Haredi communities are Monsey, NY and Lakewood, NJ. Much of the online content made and many of the content viewers and participants come from these two places. In Monsey, the population has risen 25.22% since the census in 2010.<sup>131</sup> Lakewood’s population has greatly increased, growing 46% from the 2010 census to the 2020 census.<sup>132</sup> This growth has turned an otherwise small town into one of the biggest cities in New Jersey.<sup>133</sup> Lakewood has a median age of 18.5, which confirms the high birth rates of the community and suggests that the city will continue to grow.<sup>134</sup> This information indicates a strongly growing population, not one that is in danger of losing enough people to produce any risk.

While it is impossible to see the results of all of these situations, it is widely believed, across many communities and platforms, that the existing chinuch system is in need of a change. The new technology being widely accepted has given a platform for ideas of change to spread through the Haredi world. The discourse that is most widely participated in revolves around parents looking for advice and support for their struggling children. Throughout many platforms, the suggested solution to changing the chinuch system is to move from being community minded to prioritizing individual needs. This suggestion being implemented would mean a very large

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<sup>130</sup> Alper, Becka a, and Alan Cooperman. “10 Key Findings about Jewish Americans.” *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>131</sup> *Monsey, New York Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)*.

<sup>132</sup> Oglesby, Amanda. “Lakewood NJ Sees Highest Population Growth in State, 2020 Census Results Show.” *Asbury Park Press*.

<sup>133</sup> Gabby Deutch. “Inside New Jersey’s Orthodox Boomtown.” *Jewish Insider*, 18 Feb. 2022.

<sup>134</sup> *Lakewood, New Jersey Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)*.

change in the Haredi education system. In our conversation, Menachem Bernfeld explained to me that allowing children to be treated as individuals is “a new idea” and that it is “radical”, but that, “in the end of the day, [the community] always tries to make things easier”.<sup>135</sup> This change in the system would make things easier for children being raised in Haredi communities. He suggested to me that while “it is going to take time”, because systems take a long time to change, he believes it will be implemented.<sup>136</sup>

As presented in the first chapter, the Haredi chinuch system currently functions as a monitor of the borders between religious and secular. This is a community based goal, and does not take individual needs in mind. It is argued in these platforms that in the current education system, a majority of children leave having experienced learning trauma or simply not feeling important. This makes many children question their place in the Haredi world. Therefore, in order to keep the next generation of children involved in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, they must be treated as individuals with individual needs. This change would mean a reworking of the ways that borders function in Haredi communities. Online Haredi platforms have created a wide participatory audience who support the changing of the chinuch system. These newly formed platforms and communities are widely spreading beliefs that, if implemented, would create radical change in the Haredi world.

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<sup>135</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem. Zoom Interview. 2 May 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

“This show is truly one of a kind! With tremendous value alone in the realization that your struggles are normal.”<sup>137</sup>

Throughout my experience doing research for this project, I have consumed hundreds of hours of Haredi media. I have not been able to ascertain exactly which groups are participating in these platforms, nor can I understand the community’s full response to these resources as an outsider. What I can surmise, however, is that change is being widely encouraged through many communities and many platforms. Covid-19’s forced adaptation of technology’s place in the Haredi world has created a platform for sharing ideas that were previously kept quiet and underground.

Moreover, communities of people can be built through these platforms. Again, I cannot know how members of the community have responded outside of these platforms to the information they have heard there and the people they have met through them. However, people seem to have found serious value and community from different online resources. Thousands of posts are made each day on the *Frum* blob, “Imamother”, and hundreds of people watch and participate in the Coach Menachem podcast live every week. Beyond the veiled anonymity of the internet, we have evidence that people are even willing to come together in person to the closely associated events of Keshet Nafshi.

The quote above is taken from Apple Podcast reviews for the *Let’s Get Real With Coach Menachem* podcast. What is most valuable to this anonymous commenter, is not the topics discussed, but that a platform has been given for issues that they have faced before. Before this

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<sup>137</sup> Bernfeld, Menachem, and Usher Parnes. *Let’s Get Real with Coach Menachem*.

podcast, they had to face these issues without the knowledge that others have experienced them as well. With this podcast, they are able to know that their “struggles are normal”.

In this paper, I have addressed the many ways the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox world interacts with the secular world.. Firstly, using the work and research of many scholars, I explain how Hasidic communities set themselves up in the United States as growing and thriving, yet isolated and separatist. I argue that all Hasidic communities have intentional contact with the secular world, and therefore, need a system to maintain their boundaries. Furthermore, I argue that schools are central to managing these borders. As schools and education play a large role in the lives of Hasidic community members at all stages of their lives, they are able to exert control over the standards for the community. The school is, therefore, the site of crucial mediation between secular culture and the Hasidic world.

My research suggests that the Haredi world is developing a new relationship to managing the borders because of the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. Technology has infiltrated and permeated the lives of many Haredi people, despite earlier attempts for community leaders to remove technology’s influence. With the need that social distancing created for innovative ways of communication, technology has taken a new form in Haredi lives. Importantly, this new relationship to technology has created interactive online platforms for community members to share their experiences and discuss their needs and concerns with each other. This has led to the popularization and expansion of criticisms of the Haredi chinuch system.

Specifically, I have looked at individual cases of parents, educators, and therapists who are suggesting change in their community. They suggest the restructuring of the educational and

child rearing systems from a community focus to an individual focus. Shifting with it, would be the boundaries of the Haredi world and the secular world.

It is impossible to know if these suggestions and changes will take place in the Haredi world. However, communities are being built through these platforms, and ideas are being shared across a wide spectrum of people. These platforms are intensely participatory, and they have brought together a wide group of people sharing their experiences of questioning the system that they have been raised in and they are raising their children in. Although they conform to the hierarchy and traditions of the Haredi communities, they open up the possibility of dramatic challenges to the Haredi education system and even the narrative of post-Holocaust survival.

Hundreds of people gather once a week in real time to share their ideas of change on *Coach Menachem*, and thousands listen and watch afterwards. On this platform, women are contributing to conversations and asking questions that may have been kept private in the past. While it has previously not been unheard of for a Rebbe to recommend leniency in individual cases, it is now happening publicly, online, and en-masse. The voices of Rabbis, educators, therapists, and community members are coming together to willingly challenge an ideology that has been perceived to be what saved Haredi communities in post-war New York. This public discourse acknowledges that the post-Holocaust strategies for survival worked in some ways, but were damaging for many individuals. On large public platforms, leaders are arguing that parents and educators should be prioritizing tolerance and individual needs instead of responding to a child's problems as a threat to the community. This message may not be new, but the new publicity and platform that this message has, could be revolutionary for Haredi communities.

If this happens, this could be one of the most significant changes of mentality and modality in the Haredi chinuch system since Haredi communities were established in the United States. Communal institutions would wield far less power in their ability to control the borders of their communities. It is unclear how that could change Haredi structures. The experts and community members sharing their opinions on the forums I have participated in, believe that it will make for stronger and happier commitments to the Haredi world. However, it is possible that without the strict control of the school on the borders, more people will explore the secular world and leave.

What is abundantly clear is that technology is changing the way that communication exists in Haredi communities. I believe that the creation of new forms of communication and new platforms to share information will continue, and communities of people sharing their questions and experiences will continue to grow. The borders of the Ultra-Orthodox community are continually shifting and negotiating with the changing times. Technology's wider acceptance into the Haredi world could be one of the largest cultural shifts that the community has made since their establishment in the United States.

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