

*Toward a Conservative Chareidi-ism*¹

By: YEHOASHUA PFEFFER

A close friend of mine, a chareidi graduate of Chevron Yeshivah living in Jerusalem and currently working at a law firm in Tel Aviv, recently underwent the unenviable experience of finding his eighth-grade daughter a place in the high school of his and her choice. He was wholly unsuccessful. Despite his and others' best efforts, she was turned down by each of the mainstream chareidi high schools he considered reasonable options. The reason for this had nothing to do with the girl's academic achievements or religious standards—she topped her class in both. Rather, she was rejected because her father is a (non-apologetic) working chareidi man. Behind closed doors, school principals will explain that it's all about economics. In the competition for elite families, each school has to be more conservative than the other, more extreme in its acceptance criteria. It is the “community”—a faceless body without name and contact details—that determines acceptance policy.

While my friend was updating me about the latest developments in his ongoing saga, I received a link to a video clip featuring some hundred and fifty men, fathers to families, standing in line to collect charity handouts of frozen meat for Pesach. There is certainly no shame in being poor, and we know well that “there will never cease to be poor in the land.”² Yet, for some communities it seems that receiving handouts has become the norm, rather than the exception. With the majority of chareidi

¹ The author wishes to thank Rabbi Mitchell Rocklin, Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, and David Weinberg, whose comments were of great value in refining this article.

² *Shemos* 15:11.

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men not working, or working in low-paid occupations, high poverty rates are hardly surprising. Women, too, are often limited in the range of professions and choices available to them. A recent conference headed by rabbinic leaders banned outright higher education for chareidi women, warning of the grave dangers these studies involve,³ while a declaration by a Rabbinic Council for Education announced that no woman with an academic degree will be accepted as a schoolteacher in high schools. These moves intend to thwart the perceived intrusion of secular and careerist goals in Torah families, but of course they also limit options for higher salaries.⁴

The men standing in line to receive handouts will have no problem getting their daughters into top institutions. They pay the price of financial dependency, but reap the benefits of being part of a close, supportive community. My friend, on the other hand, earns a good income and has no need to stand in handout lines—yet he is forced to pay a social cost that is hard to translate into dollars and cents.

Rising social costs on all sides are heralds of change. In a sociological sense, it seems that high poverty rates, an increasing sense of public frustration, and changes in leadership structures have produced a growing body of individuals who feel estranged from the mainstream chareidi body. Depending on multiple personal factors, some “leave the fold” altogether, embarking on an arduous journey out of chareidi society to which some research has been devoted.⁵ Many, however, for religious or social reasons, are looking to minimize social costs while retaining their chareidi identity. Some are gravitating from the mainstream outwards, beginning to form their own communities and establish their own institutions. Their relationship with mainstream chareidim is fluid, and their significance thereto remains to be seen. Others remain a part of their home communities, while embarking on career paths that bring them into contact with greater Israel. Some research has been dedicated to this diverse group;⁶ more will surely emerge.

This article will not dwell at length on matters of chareidi sociology, important though they surely are. Instead, I will seek to elucidate a conceptual framework through which some of the recent trends in Israeli

³ See <http://www.kikar.co.il/187092.html> (accessed 13.7.2017).

⁴ See <http://mobile.kikar.co.il/article/238873> (accessed 13.7.2017).

⁵ See, for instance, Faranak Margolese, *Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism: How to Respond to the Challenge* (2005); for the challenges of those who leave, see Roni Berger, “Challenges and Coping Strategies in Leaving an Ultra-Orthodox Community,” *Qualitative Social Work* 2015, Vol. 14(5) 670–686.

⁶ See Haim Zicherman, *Black, Blue-White* (Tel Aviv: 2014) [Hebrew], pp 99-111, 335-344.

chareidi society can be better understood. Many in chareidi society today face a tricky convergence of deep isolationist impulses with increasing integration into broader society, and it seems of the essence to articulate such a framework, which can provide not only an understanding of the present, but even a modicum of guidance for the future.

I will therefore not address the matter of whether chareidi society will head toward greater integration with non-chareidi Israel in areas such as workforce participation, higher education, political and civil involvement, law, responsibility for government and legal institutions, and others. It seems this question already has a clear answer, which is hardly set to change—though one can never know. The question rather is how to ensure the preservation of all that is good and pure in the chareidi model, while accepting partial integration with general society as a fact. Doing so is important not only for the benefit of those individuals already committed to a path of greater involvement in civil society; it is crucial even as a response to those who assert that loyalty to the chareidi ideal and broader civil involvement are incompatible, a contradiction in terms.⁷ This model will need to combine the disposition to preserve with the capacity for change—to use Edmund Burke’s formulation, to which we will return later—and to realize the dual goal in the specifically Jewish context of chareidi society. I believe an intellectual investment in this direction can reap significant returns; and I hope this article can perhaps constitute one small step toward this achievement.

Choosing Between Books

In my limited experience, the chareidi man (or woman) who decides to broaden his (or her) horizons beyond the enclaves of chareidi society—whether out of an intellectual search for the truth, a concrete vocation-related need or simple curiosity—will often begin his (or her) journey accompanied by thinkers from the left side of the political spectrum.

I have met many such individuals personally, and have communicated virtually with still more. They are typically young men, dressed in full chareidi garb, walking briskly or perhaps a little nervously, and holding opaque bags whose content is kept close to their hearts. From my experience, the bag is likely to hold library volumes of progressives such as

⁷ In one of our heated conversations, a noted author of several pamphlets making this argument told me that leaving the protective enclave of the *beis midrash* is equivalent to placing oneself before a firing squad. It follows that even somebody clearly incapable of dedicated Torah study should rather waste his in the study hall than commit spiritual suicide. The onus is upon chareidi “integrators” to demonstrate that this is not the case.

Michel Foucault and Albert Camus, or Jewish thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas or even Mordechai Kaplan (though even I was surprised when an unassuming Gerrer Chasid, *boyzn-zoken* and all, told me his first foray into non-chareidi literature was Kaplan's *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*). I have yet to find the conservative likes of Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville or Leo Strauss. Even where Orthodox volumes are present, Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg's (Rav Shagar) original brand of Jewish postmodernism is often there; Rabbi Sacks is a rare exception. It is, I suppose, the way of brown paper bags to favor Foucault over Burke.

This preference has several good reasons. The chareidi bag-bearer is consciously breaking down the normative boundaries, spoken or unspoken, of his social group. In his self-awareness he is non-conformist, and his natural inclination thus leans towards thinkers who endorse liberalism and individualism, writers who perceive institutions as inherently oppressive and beg to dismantle them. Moreover, since the surrounding intellectual atmosphere favors the progressive over the conservative, it comes as no surprise that the first encounter with Western thought is unlikely to be with Burke and Tocqueville; these are simply not the books on the supermarket shelves. Naturally, those (with transparent bags) who court the favors of non-chareidi NGOs eager to enter the chareidi space will go the same way.

But subtle change, if it is to be deep and true, and if it is to preserve all that is good and pure about chareidi Judaism (and there is much), will not come from the radical corners of Western thought. There is what to learn from all intellectual traditions: "Who is the wise?—He who learns from every man."⁸ But if the goal is to provide constructive responses to contemporary challenges, and not a vision of personal liberation for the oppressed, it seems better advised to look to British moderates than to French radicals (given the choice; there are, of course, other options)—to the conservative tradition rather than the progressive one. Yet, I certainly understand those young chareidi persons who turn intuitively to the intellectual Left. I understand them not only because of the leftward inclination of a person paving his individual track in a collective society, or because of the distinct trend of today's enlightenment. Upon reflection, it seems even that the *shidduch* between contemporary chareidi society and classical conservatism raises more friction than it does harmony.

Intuition would predict otherwise. The English rendition of "chareidi-ism" is ultra-Orthodoxy, which, while not a synonym, is certainly complementary with ultra-conservatism. Indeed, there are many policy is-

⁸ *Mishnah, Avos* 4:1.

sues where the two converge, from morality in the public sphere to prevalent attitudes concerning national security. It come as no surprise that chareidi political parties have predominantly been part of Right-wing political coalitions, which have held power on-and-off since 1977. However, I believe a deeper probe will reveal that the political tradition of conservatism,⁹ instead of being smoothly coherent with the conservatism of chareidi society, is actually in some tension with it.

Before explaining where this tension lies, it seems important to provide a basic outline of the politically conservative mindset. Following this, I will give a brief account, in very broad strokes, of how the Jewish tradition matches or fails to match the conservative disposition. After these two introductions, I will turn to chareidi society and seek to highlight the significant differences between the conservative mindset and the chareidi persuasion.

Preserving and Improving

The crux of the conflict between conservatism and liberalism (the modern, progressive version) can be framed in terms of epistemology: What is the most important source of knowledge for human society? The answer (broadly) given by liberalism is human reason, as eloquently articulated by the French philosophical tradition and its disciples (such as Thomas Paine in his *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*). For the conservative tradition, the answer is (broadly) human experience. Conservative thinkers underscore time and again that human society is not merely a blank sheet of paper upon which scribes can write whatever they deem right and proper. The accumulated wisdom of multiple generations must be given appropriate respect, and due caution must be applied to the effect of change from the political-social product that our ancestors bequeathed us. Edmund Burke, in his sharp critique of the French revolutionists who elevated human reason to a height of divinity, stated:

Whilst they are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience and an increasing public strength and national prosperity. They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought underground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of

⁹ For purposes of this essay, when I refer to the political conservative tradition I mean the Anglo-American conservative tradition, rather than the European or Russian versions. Even within the Anglo-American tradition there are of course different streams and versions; I will not do these distinctions justice.

antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament. They have the “rights of men.” Against these there can be no prescription, against these no agreement is binding; these admit no temperament and no compromise; anything withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice. [...] The objections of these speculators, if its forms do not quadrate with their theories, are as valid against such an old and beneficent government as against the most violent tyranny or the greenest usurpation.¹⁰

In the eyes of the conservative, a central political virtue (some would even say the most central) is therefore *prudence*. Conservatives pay a deeply set respect to existing social institutions that have passed the test of time, from the family to government agencies, and are wary of collapsing them in the name of progress. Irving Kristol noted that in the enlightened, progressive mindset “existing institutions could be legitimized only by reason: not by tradition, not by custom, not even by the fact that they seemed to be efficacious in permitting men to lead decent lives, but only by reason.”¹¹ Contrary to this approach, the conservative outlook holds that a certain collective wisdom and purpose inheres in long-lasting institutions. As Kristol continues, “the fact that we don’t perfectly understand or cannot perfectly explain why they work is no defect in them but merely a limitation in us.”

Prudence, however, does not preclude change. Certainly, there are changes that the conservative persuasion will concede are right and necessary—hence the rarity of conservatives who wish to reestablish monarchic rule, or those who yearn for a return to the institutions of feudal Europe. Burke spoke about a “disposition to preserve and an ability to improve,” the underlying premise being that the latter is required for the proper execution of the former: without the capacity for adaptation to new circumstances, the old itself will stagnate and cease to function as it should. But for the conservative disposition, such changes are the result of organic processes that take place over a historical progression, and not of an artificial imposition of an idea or ideology, however lofty it might be, on a given society. For this reason, conservatism has been categorized as the “negation of ideology.” Abstract thought has its place, but the drive to realize a perfect abstract in real life must be tempered by a respect for custom and tradition.

This does not mean that a conservative must hallow the present—a danger we are too familiar with. An accusation of doing just that was levelled at Michael Oakeshott, who claimed that being conservative is “to

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indiana, 1987), p. 51.

¹¹ Irving Kristol, *Utopianism, Ancient and Modern*.

prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”¹² Oakeshott effectively isolates the present, which might provide a good recipe for stability, yet fails in furnishing the human condition with a deep sense of meaning. Irving Kristol challenged this, asserting that the Jewish and Christian traditions link us inexorably with past and future, transcending the present even as we live it. Religion does urge us to sanctify the present in our daily lives, “but always reminding us that we are capable of doing so only through G-d’s grace to our distant forefathers.”¹³ At the same time, it presents a core duty “to link our children and grandchildren to this ‘great chain of being’ [...] sanctifying the present [...] to prepare for a redemptive future.”¹⁴

The political vision of conservatism thus offers a combination of respect for existing institutions, prudence concerning social change, and suspicion with regard to ideologies and utopias. It respects the glory of the past and the hope of the future, yet is wary of rushing toward either of them while ignoring the value of present stability. This mindset forms the foundation for a broad set of beliefs largely shared by conservatives of different kinds, ranging from public morality to national security, from economic policy to the definition of a decent education. To mention one general rule, conservatives are generally suspicious of central planning and authority, preferring the practical wisdom of the masses to the planning of the few—hence the preference of the free market model to socialism and its spinoffs. Its attention to consequences (and for some streams, its deep realism) cautions against making too close a connection between the abstractions of academia and the messiness of political reality.¹⁵

¹² Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), 169.

¹³ Irving Kristol, “America’s Exceptional Conservatism,” *Neoconservatism, the Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 375.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This is reflected, for instance, in cabinet picks of Republican and Democrat establishments. In comparing the very different cabinets chosen by the last two U.S. presidents, Kayleigh McEnany wrote that “President Barack Obama filled his Cabinet with individuals whose greatest achievements were dreaming up unworkable Democratic utopias from the far-off perches of academia and Washington bureaucracy. By contrast, President-elect Donald Trump has appointed doers and captains of industry” (Kayleigh McEnany, “A Tale of Two Cabinets: Obama’s cronies vs. Trump’s captains of industry,” *The Hill* (12.13.16); <https://goo.gl/KTfVxE>). Trump is a far cry from the conservative statesman, but in terms of his cabinet picks he followed conventional party lines.

Tradition, not Stagnation

Judaism is identical to conservatism. A brief scan of the Bible should suffice in bringing us to this conclusion. In the Epilogue to his recent *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson has provided an eloquent description of Judaism's contribution to moral thought:

All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the ideas of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience, and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience, and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal, and love as the foundation of justice; and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place.¹⁶

In their contributing “more to civilize men than any other nation that ever inhabited this earth” (to cite John Adams), the Jews had little respect for the divine right of kings. In terms of political order, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has thus written that ancient Judaism was anything but conservative—this by contrast with other cultures of the Near East:

The religious passion of the ancient world was, above all, for order in the midst of an ever-threatening chaos, whether in the form of floods and droughts, foreign invasions, or damaging internal conflicts of power. The mindset of myth is profoundly conservative, seeking to canonize the status quo. [...] Compare this with the exhilaration of Hannah's song of thanksgiving when she gives birth to a long-awaited son: “The Lord sends poverty and wealth; He humbles and exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash-heap” (I Samuel, 2:7–8). For the first time, G-d is associated with change, transformation, revolution.¹⁷

It is no coincidence that after receiving basic political rights, Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were on the whole a force for revolution rather than for political stability *per se*, most prominently of course in the Bolshevik revolution. There are many factors that contributed to this phenomenon, yet it stands to reason that the biblical-Jewish search for justice, equity, and compassion was a deep part of it.

¹⁶ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: 1987), p. 585.

¹⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Haggadah* (New York: 2013), p. 30.

Thus, the ethical monotheism Judaism brought to the world has often been a force for revolution—revolution, as Johnson and many others have pointed out, which set the world on a new path of moral redemption. Yet, while revolutionary vis-à-vis the paganism of the ancient world, the progression of Jewish tradition, certainly in its post-Talmudic development, is eminently conservative. The words of Lord John Acton, reflecting on the government sanctioned by Israel and Heaven, are instructive:

The inspired men who rose up in unending succession to prophesy against the usurper and the tyrant, constantly proclaimed that the laws, which were Divine, were paramount over sinful rulers, and appealed from the established authorities, from the king, the priests, and the princes of the people, to the healing forces that slept in the uncorrupted conscience of the masses. Thus the example of the Hebrew nation laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has been won—the doctrine of national tradition, and the doctrine of the higher law; the principle that a constitution grows from a root, by process of development and not of essential change; and the principle that all political authorities must be tested and reformed according to a code which was not made by man. The operation of these two principles, in unison or in antagonism, occupies the whole of the space we are going over together.¹⁸

The laws are paramount over sinful rulers; but the constitution grows by “process of development,” and not by “essential change.” The internal dynamic of Judaism is, indeed, deeply consistent with the Burkean summation of the conservative outlook: a disposition to preserve, coupled with an ability to improve. The source of this structure is the rabbinic exegesis on the word *vehatoros*, “and the laws”¹⁹: “This teaches us that two Laws (*toros*) were given to Israel: One Written and one Oral.”²⁰ Without the Oral tradition of interpretation that accompanies the Written Law, Jews would be at a loss to understand the way in which many Torah concepts should be performed. But the tradition serves a function beyond merely explaining the intention of the written instruction: by means of a dynamic yet traditional process, it allows each generation to apply the Torah to the changing circumstances of human existence, while firmly anchoring it to substance and procedures that are fixed and immutable. The law itself—its values, underlying principles, basic norms and mechanisms—is eternal. At the same time, there remains room for adjustment

¹⁸ John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *Essays in the History of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), pp. 7–8.

¹⁹ *Vayikra* 26:46.

²⁰ *Sifra*, *Bechukosai* 8:12.

in its contemporary application, based on changes in the circumstances of human living. Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glazner (1856–1925, also known after his written works as *Dor Revi'i*), summed this up in the introduction to his commentary to tractate *Chullin*:

And now: He who does not wish to corrupt the true will now understand that the handing over of the Oral tradition by heart, and the proscription against its commitment to writing, were so that it should not be fixed for all generations, and in order that the hands of the Sages of each generation should not be tied in interpreting the verses according to their understanding. Only thus can the Torah be eternal, for the change in generations and their mindset, their situation and their physical and moral status, require changes in the laws, the enactments and the decrees.²¹

The combination of an unchanging foundation with an inbuilt capacity for adjustment is representative of the conservative model. It defines an inherent propensity to preserve, together with a mechanism intended to ensure that *halachah*—Jewish Law and custom—should remain forever contemporary. The capacity for change does not draw from a progressive tendency—a fundamental impulse for change *qua* change, undoing the past for a better future²²—but is rather essential for the cause of preservation itself. Thus the Vilna Gaon taught that if a person fails to rise, he will inevitably fall.²³ The human condition is always in flux, and lacks a neutral gear: a failure to improve implies inevitable decline. While this is surely true on the individual level, the principle holds true even for human society at large. The only method of preserving good is by effecting positive change. An absence of social advancement is a sure recipe for social decay.

When Hillel the Elder enacted the *prosbul*—a mechanism to circumvent the biblical law of *shemmitas kesafim* whereby debts between Jews are released once in seven years—he was surely not moved by a desire to change the Torah, but rather by the need to preserve it. Hillel saw that on account of the mandatory release, people had stopped lending the poor

²¹ Moshe Shmuel Glasner, *Dor Revi'i (Chullin)*, p. 3.

²² As an illustration of this mindset, one that favors revolution over evolution, is found in Immanuel Kant's response to the question "What is Enlightenment?": "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another... 'Sapere aude!'"

²³ Commentary of the Vilna Gaon to *Mishlei* 16:24.

for fear they would never see their money back. In financial circumstances deeply changed from the purely agrarian society of biblical times, Hillel saw that rather the injunction of debt release, rather than helping the poor, was actually hurting them. In order to preserve the Torah value of supporting the destitute, Hillel enacted the *proshul* mechanism, making use of well-established halachic principles that had not yet been institutionalized, so that debt release could be circumvented. Thus, those with the means could continue to lend money to the poor, without concern for losing their wealth.²⁴ The change he legislated was effected to preserve, not to transform. When the Sages decreed that the Oral Law should be committed to writing, despite a long-established precedent not to do so, it was done to preserve the tradition itself, which was in danger of being forgotten.²⁵ And when Rabbeinu Gershom decreed prohibitions against polygamy, against divorcing a woman against her will, and against child weddings, he was ensuring the longevity of Torah values even as he deviated from Torah law.

The authority vested in rabbinic leaders to enact supplementary legislation, and at times to interpret Torah Law anew, ensures the eternity of the Law itself. The ability to “improve,” to use the Burkean term, is part and parcel of preservation. In modern times, the kind of enactments and interpretations common to the Talmud are rare. Yet, the tradition remains anything but static, as a cursory glance at differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry (in terms of laws, customs, culture and folklore) will demonstrate. Though the “sealing” of the Talmud reduced the scope of post-Talmudic changes, the difference between the two traditions indicates the considerable latitude that remains for interpretation and alteration.

For a contemporary example of changing halachic praxis, note the following two responses of Rav Moshe Sternbuch (a leading contemporary authority of ultra-Orthodoxy), both relating to in vitro fertilization (IVF). In 1991, Rav Sternbuch came out strongly against the then-new concept, banning the procedure outright for a number of reasons (including the problem of the “spilling seed” from the potential father, the blurring of Jewish lineage and damage to the sanctity of the Jewish People), and arguing that a child born by such means does not relate (in a halachic sense) after his father.²⁶ In particular, Rav Sternbuch warned of the severe consequences that laboratory mix-ups could cause, which would “ruin the sanctity and lineage of Israel.” Twenty years later (2011), Rav Sternbuch

²⁴ See *Mishnah, Sheviis* 10:3–4; *Gittin* 4:3.

²⁵ *Temurah* 14b; see Rambam, Introduction to *Mishnah Torah*.

²⁶ R. Moshe Sternbuch, *Shut Tesbuwot Ve-Hanbagot*, Vol. 2, no. 689.

had made a comprehensive about-turn on the subject, writing that if the procedure is done under the supervision and advice of expert doctors, then a childless couple has a *full halachic obligation* to pursue the course of artificial insemination. He adds that there is no concern over the halachic lineage of the child.²⁷

Rav Sternbuch encapsulates the “disposition to preserve” coupled with the “ability to improve.” In the first instance, his reaction to revolutionary technologies in the field of procreation was wholly negative, for fear of introducing radical and harmful changes into the family unit, and in particular because of concern for mix-ups. These concerns brought him to issue his initially stringent ruling. But after it had been tested by the course of time, which proved that the positive effect (enabling childless couples to bear children) came without a daunting price tag (it was possible to ensure with certainty that no mix-ups occur), he could agree that it is permitted and even obligatory for childless couples.

Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (“Rav Shagar”), a religious-Zionist rabbi identified with neo-Chasidism, gives an eloquent expression of the mindset enabling this process:

In my opinion religious-Zionism must adopt certain ultra-Orthodox strategies and practices if it wishes to survive... [I]t needs to understand that under certain circumstances, the contradiction between values of holiness and those common to Israeli society is too great (for instance in the matter of hedonism). This requires both a degree of seclusion, and also an isolationist educational outlook that builds an environment appropriate for holiness, alongside the common environments in which we integrate with general society. In these contexts the place of *halachah* is of special importance. *Halachah* must bring the redemption of the past into our world, and therefore it must not be modernized and updated, but must rather lag behind the reality on the surface that changes without abate. This gap constitutes conflict and tension, which are essential in representing the absolute, and express the connection to the past and the realization of the Divine will in the present. On the other hand, however, *halachah* must also be aware of the changes taking place within it, in line with the social changes. It cannot grasp the past in a dogmatic, fossilized manner.²⁸

While maintaining a capacity for change, Jewish *halachah* represents the absolute. It reflects an eternal relationship with G-d, and articulates

²⁷ R. Moshe Sternbuch, *Shut Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot*, Vol. 6, no. 241.

²⁸ R. Shimshon Gershon Rosenberg, *Luchos VeShivrei Luchos* (2013), p. 202.

values whose underlying meaning remains constant, even if their expression might adjust over time.²⁹

Beyond its historical development, the substantive Torah ideal is far from being abstract and theoretical in nature, but relates rather to living practice. Together with providing a description of the good, it instructs us on how this good should be applied to daily life, such that we are urged to “know Him in all your ways.”³⁰ The laws of deception (*ona'ab*) ensure that we are not exploitive in our business dealings; tithing and related laws remind us that our yield is the gift of G-d, and we should share it with the needy; the laws relating to marital conduct, together with the Talmudic interpretative tradition, serve to raise marital life “to the personal level of human existence as the natural outcome of the personalization of the relationship between a man and a woman who encounter each other in the completeness of their bio-psychic being.”³¹

Judaism is thus about the elevation of human action in every realm of personal and communal interaction. It is consciously aware of the confines of human nature and the limitations on our ability to create the perfect society, and invests the greater part of its intellectual energy in the everyday spheres of justice and halachic praxis. Judaism operates traditionally within the world, without any pretensions to nullify it; it seeks to improve our surroundings through the toils of self-improvement and a commitment to the Divine law as interpreted by Man.

Between Isolationism and Conservatism

Those who look at chareidi society from the outside tend to see it through the flattening lens of ultra-conservatism. Chareidim continue to dress today in the fashion of pre-war Eastern Europe; some, in particular Chasidim from certain courts, continue to speak Yiddish; the great majority of chareidi men are bearded; women continue to be banned from holding religious or political public office; rules of public modesty are unchanging; and the model of small and isolated communities continues to flourish.

²⁹ Rarely, in extreme circumstances, the social model in which *halachab* was enacted did undergo significant change. An example of this is the development of *chasidus* in the 18th and 19th centuries, during which the emphasis of Jewish religious life underwent considerable change in a relatively short time. Under conditions of extreme hardship, the capacity for rapid change is basic for survival. As explained later, the building of the yeshiva community in Israel is somewhat similar.

³⁰ *Mishlei* 3:6.

³¹ Eliezer Berkovits, “A Jewish Sexual Ethics,” in *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Shalem, 2002), p. 120.

Indeed, in its effort to protect Jewish society from the winds of change blowing in from the West, chareidi society adopted a strategy of isolationism as the foundation for its social model. European Enlightenment and Jewish emancipation created a tidal wave of secularization, together with the creation of Jewish reform movements. In turn, these led Orthodox communities to embrace isolationist policies, the more so with regard to Jewish *maskilim*. The trend was strengthened still further in the State of Israel, where the secular leadership looked to forge a new Jewish identity, detached and removed from the exilic model that was depicted as primitive and inferior. The chareidi response to heightened tensions with secular Israeli society was to reinforce the isolationist ideal, raising it to a level that had hitherto represented only part of the chareidi world.³²

The segregationist model turned chareidi society into a closed community that takes exception to all and any change, out of concern that it reflects the penetration of outside influences. By way of example, albeit extreme, a recent chareidi publication disparaged current practice of refraining from corporal punishment in the chareidi school system. The argument was that this is surely wrong in principle, “for is it possible that all the generations, throughout the dispersion of Israel, in which corporal punishment was legitimate, were all wrong? Is the situation of education and morality better today, that we should denigrate the methods of the ancients?”³³ The example is admittedly radical, and hardly representative of mainstream public opinion. Yet it does illustrate the kind of argumentation commonly raised by the more conservative branches of chareidi society. The famed expression “new [*chadasb*] is forbidden from the Torah” might have been said by the Hungarian luminary R. Moshe Sofer, and implemented first and foremost by his disciples and their communities—but over time it came to represent the *weltanschauung* of the chareidi establishment everywhere.

Based on the sections above, it thus seems that while the basic chareidi impulse is surely conservative—a deep desire to preserve the integrity of Orthodoxy society, a community structured around the upkeep of Torah precepts—its social tools for doing are quite unconservative.³⁴ The

³² Note that this isolationism is not designed to hermetically seal off the community, so much as to allow it to monitor all external influences that might creep in unawares. Chareidim invest much in outreach to other Jews, engaging them on their own turf. But they do so on their own terms, exercising maximum control over the encounters.

³³ *Emet Al-Tila*, Vol. 6 (Adar, 5776), p. 9.

³⁴ See Michael K. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard,

idea that “anything new is forbidden” is surely radical; as we have seen, the potential for positive change is built into conservative thought. Even assuming it is chiefly a rhetorical flourish, and that in practice things do change when circumstances demand it, the rhetoric remains significant for setting the tone of a still unrevoked “state of emergency” that chareidi society characterizes.

Moreover, it is important to look not only at a given policy, but even at its immediate consequences. Adam Smith and more recently Robert Merton have shown that social measures will invariably have a range of “unintended consequences”—which is precisely the reason for the prudence advocated by conservatives. It thus transpired that the same isolationist model, whose foundations were deeply embedded in the aspiration to conserve, led chareidi society to stretch its boundaries in a manner certainly Orthodox, but hardly congruent with political conservatism. This is not to say that the policy was bad for Judaism; on the contrary, it might have been the only way to salvage Orthodoxy from the ravages of Enlightenment, extreme circumstances justifying extreme measures. The Burkean disposition is hardly a fitting temper for fighting survival wars—which is the condition in which chareidi society traditionally sees itself. However, the point of incongruity with political conservatism remains worthy of noting.

A clear example of this is the field of *halachic* observance, and specifically in the disposition toward stringency. Writing in 1965, Rabbi Simcha Elberg (a Rabbi and scholar who served on the executive committee of Agudath Israel of America) thus defined the city Bnei Brak as a “world of strictures”:

The Bnei Brak ideal embodies a great revolution in the entire gamut of religious life. Bnei Brak searches for stringencies rather than for leniencies. The world at large, even the religious world, generally looks for leniencies. [...] Not so in Bnei Brak! A kollel student living under the spiritual influence of the Chazon Ish [...] will search for the opinion that prohibits, the stringency, which is more particular. He does not seek out and does not rely on the lenient opinion, but

1992). Silber points out that “[o]f all the branches of modern-day Judaism, ultra-Orthodoxy is undoubtedly the most tradition-oriented. [...] And yet, like other antimodern conservative movements, ultraOrthodoxy is clearly a recent phenomenon. Belying the conventional wisdom of both its adherents and its opponents, it is in fact not an unchanged and unchanging remnant of premodern, traditional Jewish society, but as much a child of modernity as any of its “modern” rivals” (p. 23).

rather on those who are stringent. Bnei Brak embodies a totally separate world, a world of the highest ideal of Torah elevation. Before the purity of the ideal, all must bow their heads and lower their stature.³⁵

As Elberg points out, this halachic approach is nothing less than a “great revolution.” It seems that a religious fervor and zeal, building on a tendency established by the Chasam Sofer and his disciples, invigorated youth toward creating a “better reality” than that of their forebears. While untraditional to say the least, the attitude also served the important purpose of setting aside chareidi *halachic* practice from that of other religious groups—groups that did not share the chareidi enthusiasm for stringencies, and for which the assumption of a working life made the stringency model harder to realize. Together with a religious fervor, the inclination to stringency can thus be seen as part of the isolationist strategy central to chareidi life.

The exception dedication of chareidi society to Torah study, often to the exclusion of all worldly occupation, expresses the same ideals. Over time, the “learning model” (or “learning society,” an expression coined by sociologist Menachem Friedman) became prevalent in the Israel chareidi community—certainly in the *litvish* sector, and to a significant degree even in *chassidish* communities.³⁶ Within this model the vast majority of able boys are directed toward an ideal of full-time Torah study continuing well into adulthood, while girls are trained to be helpmates, acting as breadwinners as well as housewives. This model developed over the first years of the nascent State of Israel, to meet the urgent necessity of rebuilding the Torah world decimated in the Holocaust. In the yeshiva worldview, which draws upon far earlier sources but newly underscores their centrality, Torah institutions are crucial both for creating a Torah leadership of rabbis and educators, and also for the sake of Torah study in and of itself. Torah study not only refines the person occupied in learning it, but is essential even for influencing his environment, and for drawing Divine blessing into the entire world.³⁷ In tandem, a political compromise was struck between chareidi representatives and the government, whereby exemptions from the draft were made contingent on refraining from workforce participation. Given the intense fear of the secularizing effect of army service, fully justified by experience of many, it is hardly surprising

³⁵ Simcha Elberg, “*Yerushalayim Shel Maalah Ve-Sbel Matah*,” *Diglenu*, Kislev-Tevet 5725.

³⁶ See Chaim Zicherman, *Shachor Kachol-Lavan* (Tel Aviv: 2014), pp. 56-64.

³⁷ Based mainly on Rav Chaim Volozhin’s *Nefesh Hachaim* (*Shaar* 4).

that few chareidi men entered the workforce.³⁸ Furthermore, the pioneering chareidi model established a viable alternative to the Zionist pioneers. While the seculars rebuilt the Jewish homeland and re-formed the Jewish ethos, the chareidim rebuilt the decimated *yeshivos* and Torah communities. In the struggle for the hearts of Jewish youth, a simple call to tradition would have been no competition against the electrifying challenge of building the Jewish State after two millennia of exile. The call to rebuild the Torah world was far more effective.

The exponential growth of the model, over just several decades, has been an astounding success. The Slonimer Rebbe described the process as a miracle and wonder:

The matter of the *kollel* students, who have the merit of their Torah being their vocation, is also among the wonders of the generation that is very difficult to understand with common sense—how so revolutionary a change came suddenly to pass, thanks to Hashem, which continues to prosper especially in the past ten to fifteen years, in which the majority of *avreichim* stay in the tent of Torah, and this is the trend for their lives. A person born into this generation cannot correctly evaluate the greatness of the wonder. Only those who knew previous generation stand in amazement, astonished at the wondrous vision that is being realized before our eyes.³⁹

Indeed, from personal experience, I can attest to young men, some of them clearly not academically minded, who over the years became Torah scholars and set up homes in which the primary values were *halachah*, kindness and modesty.⁴⁰ And while circumstances today are much different from those of the early 1950s, it continues to flourish. Indeed, many claim that although the yeshiva world is far larger than any historical precedent knows, the model goes on serving crucial purposes. Not only does it continue to develop Torah scholarship, but it even shields chareidi men from a secular society that might be less ideologically charged, yet remains no less a threat to spiritual wellbeing than Zionist state-building.

But few are the miracles and wonders that fit the conservative mold; and while justified in many ways, necessity does not make the notion of the “learning society” any more consistent with the conservative disposition. The accumulated wisdom of many generations indicates that for

³⁸ There is much more to say about the choice of Israeli chareidi men to refrain from working. See Eli Berman, “Sect, subsidy, and sacrifice: an economist’s view of ultra-orthodox Jews,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115:3 (2000) 905-953.

³⁹ Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky, *Diglenn*, Nissan 5743.

⁴⁰ Based on *Micha* 6:8.

most people, and certainly for society in general, a working life is of great importance. A lifelong and exclusive dedication to intellectual pursuit is generally the lot of the few, not of the many.⁴¹ Looking at past generations, it comes as little surprise to find that most individuals dedicated the greater part of their day to working jobs, while setting aside whatever time they could for Torah study. The wealthier of them were also able to support great scholars and illustrious institutions of Torah study, in which rabbinic leadership was fostered.

In the early years of the State of Israel, the small size of the chareidi community and the circumstances of the nascent state allowed the great majority of yeshiva graduates to quickly find Torah-related occupations, whether as teachers (yeshiva graduates became Torah teachers for all sectors of Israeli society), as yeshiva heads, as official (state) and non-official rabbis, and as other Torah (and some non-Torah) professionals. Those who excelled in their studies would continue learning for a longer time, and would go on to become the great Torah luminaries of the generation. But as numbers burgeoned and jobs became scarce, the unconventional nature of chareidi society became more pronounced, and the risks of limiting choices of occupation were amplified.

An observation made in the Talmud by the sage Abaye seems germane to this discussion.⁴² R. Shimon bar Yochai and R. Yishmael famously dispute whether a person should combine Torah study with a worldly occupation, or whether the ideal is to dedicate oneself totally and absolutely to Torah study, and to refrain altogether from worldly activity. Based on the verse “And you shall gather your grain,”⁴³ R. Yishmael maintains that the optimal way for a person to live is to abide by “the way of the land.” R. Shimon, however, claims that if Jews were to occupy themselves in worldly occupations, which would inevitably take up the main part of their day, then “what will be with the Torah?” Rather, he advises that one should dedicate himself exclusively to Torah study, while “others” will take care of worldly needs. Reflecting on the dispute, Abaye concludes with a statement culled from empirical observation: “Many followed R. Yishmael and succeeded; many followed R. Shimon bar Yochai and did not succeed.” It would be a crude simplification to directly apply

⁴¹ See *Noraos Harav*, Vol. 8 (ed. B. David Schreiber), 1998, pp. 87–8. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that like other esoteric fields of education, in-depth Torah study at the highest level is “limited to a small group of people who can comprehend the Torah.”

⁴² *Berachos* 35b.

⁴³ *Devarim* 11:14.

the dispute between R. Shimon bar Yochai and R. Yishmael to the modern day; certainly, even those in full-time Torah study today fall far from the worldly detachment advocated by bar Yocai. Yet Abaye's conservative observation, *mutatis mutandis*, remains relevant.

Another indication of the difference between chareidi ultra-Orthodoxy and political conservatism is the redefined role of women. One of the key factors that made the phenomenon of the "learning society" viable was the enthusiasm of young women to wed and financially sustain a Torah scholar. This *modus operandi* was promoted intensively in the Bais Yaakov system as the ideal by which women can earn their share in both this world and the next. Indeed, in a short time, the dream of every normative chareidi girl had become to dedicate her married life to the Torah study of her husband, living the vision of Avraham Yosef Wolf (a disciple of the Chazon Ish and dean, from 1952, of the Bais Yaakov institution in Bnei Brak), who provided his students with a clear-cut formula for a meaningful life. It seems that over time, the idealism of chareidi women, who, relative to men, experience the tension with reality from a distance, has overshadowed even that of men, so that some men are deterred from working by their wives' zeal. As it were, taking the step constitutes a "breach of contract."

While the notion of a woman sustaining her rabbinic husband by going to work was hardly new, its application on a society-wide level was historically unheard of, and involved a reversal of traditional family roles. As noted above, in the early years of the State, Torah-related and internal-chareidi jobs were generally available to men who wished to earn an income. But over time these became progressively harder to find, and the dominance of women as the principal breadwinners in the community became more pronounced. Concomitantly, as teaching jobs became scarce, chareidi women began to branch out into a wide array of occupations, from computer engineering to accountancy, and even into law and medicine. This radical change in traditional gender roles, which seems anathema to the conservative disposition, was an easy pill to swallow for chareidi ideologues of the time. For them, the preservation of the Torah community was key, and conservative intuitions could be set aside to accommodate the primary goal.

Like many other movements of the masses, a prominent feature of the nascent model was an inherent tension between parents and children. Menachem Friedman asserts that mothers in the fifties, whose daughters had absorbed the new doctrine at school, "could not understand why ... [their] refusal to confirm [their daughters'] marriage to a man who wished to study in 'kollel' not only prevented her from realizing her purpose in life, but even from achieving her 'reward'—the reward of Torah study—

for the World to Come.”⁴⁴ Parental skepticism did not dampen children’s resolve; it only strengthened it. Moshe Scheinfeld, a noted chareidi ideologue of the period, notes the “remarkable” phenomenon of children who are “more perfected” than their parents, finding completion “between the walls of the holy *yeshivos*, in the ethical discourses of the *Mashgichim* and the lifestyles of the Torah luminaries whom they follow with admiration.”⁴⁵ Scheinfeld claims that parents can only blame themselves—their lukewarm positions concerning *halachic* observance and *hashkafa* (Torah worldview)—for their children’s “rebelliousness against them in their hearts, and urging them to greater perfection, to self-sacrifice and to greater coherency in deed and in worldview.” According to Scheinfeld, “today’s youth is totally free of the false promises that once held him captive [...] Like hundreds of years ago, we find today once more young women whose deepest desire is the merit of a husband for whom Torah is the sole occupation, and they gladly accept upon themselves the yoke of breadwinning.”

Returning to the “world of strictures” referred to by Elberg, it is noteworthy that stringencies are predominantly text-based, whether based on an opinion among *halachic* authorities or a novel interpretation that calls for greater stringency. This recalls Haym Soloveitchik’s famous essay on contemporary Orthodoxy,⁴⁶ in which he characterizes the change religious Jewry has undergone as “the new and controlling role that texts now play in contemporary religious life.” For Soloveitchik, Jewish tradition—a way of life not learned but rather absorbed, transmitted from parents to children and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school—has to a large degree given way to the letter of a written law that overrules the independent status of common practice. He explains that the shift of authority from mimetic tradition to texts has had far-reaching effects, not only altering the nature of religious performance, but also transforming the character and purpose of education, redistributing political power (in non-*chassidic* circles), and redefining the scope of religion in the political arena. My own yeshiva experience certainly dovetails with Soloveitchik’s analysis: I recall imploring family members to amend the *viduy* texts in their Yom Kippur prayers, and for several years I even subtly changed the text of *kiddush* for Friday Night to fit the version endorsed by the Vilna Gaon.

Of chareidi society Soloveitchik writes that “[t]he past is cast in the mold of the present, and the current text-society emerges not as a product

⁴⁴ Menachem Friedman, *HaChevrah HaChareidis* (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 58.

⁴⁵ Moshe Scheinfeld, “*VeHeshiv Lev Avos al Banim*,” *Diglenu*, Nissan 5714.

⁴⁶ Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction,” *Tradition* 28:4, pp. 64–130.

of the twin ruptures of migration and acculturation, but as simply an on-going reflection of the unchanging essence of Jewish history.” Reading this passage reminded me of Joseph de Maistre, who pointed out that the most divine institutions are also the most durable. From here de Maistre culled the cynical leadership tip: “If you wish to *conserve* all, *consecrate* all.”⁴⁷ Consecration, of course, calls upon traditional societies to find precedents in the past, hence Soloveitchik’s “the past is cast in the mold of the present.” This seems especially true of the recently augmented radical factions of chareidi society. The proliferation of leaflets, pamphlets, broadsides and the like on the part of these elements, all of them decrying the threat of “innovations” to the integrity of chareidi society, bear witness to the intensity of the challenges currently faced. But some change, as the Vilna Gaon taught, is at all times necessary: if you cannot improve, your attempt to preserve will also fail, and you are bound to fall. And some change is, indeed, taking place. The question is how much of it is positive; and for our purposes, whether it is of the conservative variety.

Opportunity and Challenge

The entry of thousands of chareidi individuals over the past decade or so into academia, the workforce, and a broadened range of Torah and intellectual pursuits, presents fascinating opportunity alongside significant challenge.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has commented (in his 2013 Erasmus Lecture) that withdrawal into protected enclaves by Orthodox Jews might be a powerful strategy, yet it comes at a “price of segregation from—and thus loss of influence on—the world outside.” This influence is part of our calling, as defined by Yeshayahu: “This people have I formed for myself; they shall tell My praise”⁴⁸—a praise most clearly heard in Jewish involvement with the broad range of difficult issues that plague human society. But praise of G-d is not only a matter for the “world outside.” As noted above, Judaism aims to sanctify life in all its walks, private and public alike. This sanctification is contingent on a preparedness to engage the variety of walks that life offers, raising them to the pinnacle of human achievement by revealing the Divine element latent therein. This sanctification is itself the praise of G-d; it broadcasts the word of G-d that we are charged

⁴⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *Essai sur le Principe Générateur des Constitutions Politiques: et des Autres Institutions Humaines* (1828), p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Yeshayahu* 43:21.

with proclaiming.⁴⁹

Today, the Jewish voice is broadcast predominantly via the megaphone of the State of Israel. By largely isolating from matters relating to the State, chareidi society has been prepared to forfeit its potential impact on such diverse areas as jurisprudence, bioethics, technology, national security, academic research, and other areas in which Israel can be a light unto itself and even unto the nations—in favor of protecting the community from spiritual harm. Thus those who are generally seen as most representative of the Jewish tradition—chareidi society—are absent from these and many other fields of policy, thought and research. The entry of chareidi individuals into a new variety of fields can pave the way for projecting a chareidi voice in their respective areas, and for bringing a fresh take to discussions from which they were traditionally absent.

Moreover, the potential of chareidi influence on the Jewish State is of great significance in and of itself. Whether we consider it part of the redemptive process or not, Israel has provided an opportunity for a great proliferation of religious life, both in developing a theoretical structure and in acting it out. What does a Jewish army look like? How does a Jewish foreign ministry function? How should a Jewish State relate to its non-Jewish minorities? How should the Jewish legal system and corpus be developed to enable their function in a real, modern society? These questions and many others, encompassing the full range of state, social and cultural issues, have been a source of inspiration for voluminous writing in the religious-Zionist community, as well as for practices that have grown out of those writings. Doubtless the chareidi community, with its profound talent pool in Torah erudition, could make a deep contribution to this literature. While its voice has hitherto been virtually absent,⁵⁰ this is possibly set to change.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See, for instance, *Yeshayahu* 40:26: “Raise your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host by number, and calls each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”

⁵⁰ A rare exception is a three-volume work of Rav Eliezer Waldenberg entitled *Hilchos Hamedinah*, published in 1952. Unfortunately, some family members perceived the publication as being denigrating to the author and his family, and therefore ensure it remains out of print.

⁵¹ It is noteworthy that in recent times, specifically chareidi politicians have been at the front of the fight for the sake of Shabbos in the public domain, and other struggles over the religious nature of the Jewish state—a place that used to be charge of religious-Zionist politics. It seems that this is predominantly in reaction to popular opinion concerning the role of the chareidi community in greater Israel. For instance, prominent Israeli politician Yair Lapid recently claimed that

In the realm of Torah study, too, the fairly narrow curriculum of classic chareidi education (for children and adults alike) has not encouraged in-depth study of Bible, Jewish philosophy and thought, *midrash*, *halachah*, ethics, and other areas and methodologies of Torah study. This, too, has seen fascinating developments of late, including the formation of chareidi study groups and even *kollelim* focusing on Tanach, Jewish thought, and more.

Developments within Israeli chareidi society trace out the possibility for a more “conservative” chareidi model—not in the religious sense, but in the political one. As more individuals enter the workforce, with many rising above the poverty line and some become affluent and engaging in philanthropy, the entire social model will become more sustainable. Broader choices of occupation will lessen the burden that many experience, and while a return to the kitchen is hardly in the cards, the chareidi superwoman will become a matter of choice rather than inevitable necessity. The chareidi voice will be heard on a range of contemporary policy issues related to Israel and the Jewish world, and will become part of the broader conversation that defines civic life. And chareidi *halachic* authorities, while remaining aloof and above the fray of general society, will issue rulings that relate to the entire gamut of everyday life in all its richness.⁵² To use the aforementioned words of Rav Shagar, chareidi society will continue to maintain “an environment appropriate for holiness,” will represent “the absolute, and express the connection to the past and the realization of the Divine will in the present,” while being fully “aware of the changes taking place within it, in line with the social changes.”⁵³

The positive realization of these developments hinges on an important and challenging condition: that those chareidi individuals heading toward deeper integration with broader society should retain their chareidi identity, and uphold chareidi values. And this, in turn, depends on their possessing a specifically conservative disposition, one that tends to the traditional rather than the radical, the moderate rather than the extreme.

This has not necessarily been the case. Experience shows that many chareidi “integrators” tend to become chareidi “reformers,” to engage in deep and sometimes fierce critique of chareidi society, and to gravitate toward new and independent communities and institutions detached from

the political deal that had been brokered over the Western Wall fell through because of pressure from chareidi websites, which both reflect and seek to influence public opinion (see <http://www.kikar.co.il/212933.html>; accessed 18.7.2017).

⁵² The impressive *teshuvos* of Rav Asher Weiss, *sblita*, are good examples of an early realization of this vision.

⁵³ *Supra*, text adjacent to footnote 28.

the chareidi mainstream.⁵⁴ Free of chareidi politics, they also tend to lean Left, sometimes even adopting the extreme language of progressive ideology and applying it to the chareidi context.⁵⁵ But constructive change is unlikely to come from this corner; and a Chareidi Spring is just as implausible as it would be disastrous.

What we seem to have then is a slightly paradoxical situation, in which a move toward a conservative chareidi model is contingent on the conservatism of chareidi individuals, whose environment and education have always been fairly radical. Recalling the fashioning of the original tongs (for “tongs are made of tongs”),⁵⁶ this is no simple feat.

Chareidi society is “extreme” by definition and by design. It is extreme in its punctilious *halachic* approach, its dedication to Torah study, its isolationism, its dress code, its leadership model, its family and community models, and so on. The *Chazon Ish* explained to his disciple R. Shlomo Cohen that his staunch objection to the Mizrahi movement was precisely on account of its moderation or mediocrity (*beinonius*). More accurately, he considered the Mizrahi to have made mediocrity into a way of life,⁵⁷ and held that while not everybody can live a life of extremism, there is nothing more pathetic than those who scorn it.⁵⁸ Thus on the one hand, retaining a chareidi identity means retaining chareidi extremism. This does not necessarily require staying in *kollel* indefinitely. Dedicating two hours a day to Torah study, in the early morning or late night, is also pretty extreme. It does mean a retention of enthusiasm for the special breed of religious excellence that chareidi life represents, even as some individuals will find themselves in the hallways of academia or spending long office hours at a day job.⁵⁹ Of course, not all members of chareidi society share

⁵⁴ The most prominent example is the chareidi Facebook world (see, for instance, The Torah Hub group: <https://goo.gl/MwHDCV>).

⁵⁵ For example, in April of 2017 I established, together with some peers, a chareidi Internet journal by the name of *Tzarich Iyun*, as a platform for in-depth writing and conversation on issues near and dear to the chareidi world. The most surprising reaction I received was from the chareidi Left (for want of a better label), whose adherents claimed that if we haven’t “liberated the chareidi woman” and “cleansed discrimination from chareidi institutions,” then the entire endeavor loses its right to exist. Providing a worthy response to the chareidi thirst for high level reading was far from being enough.

⁵⁶ See *Mishnah, Avos* 5:6.

⁵⁷ Moshe Sheinfeld, “Yalkut Daas Torah Me’es Gedolei Hador Ha’acharon,” in Rav Elchanan Wasserman, *Ikevesa Demeshicha* (5749), pp. 35-36.

⁵⁸ *Iggros Chazon Ish*, Vol. 3, Letter 61.

⁵⁹ For an elaboration on the principle of religious excellence in chareidi society, see my recent article, “Toward a Chareidi Middle Class,” *Tzarich Iyun* (3rd Sivan 5777) (<https://goo.gl/4U93vw>; accessed 10.7.2017).

this religious fervor; but the identity of those in *kollel* is secure by their sociological belonging, which is not true of those outside.

But religious extremism does not have to morph into political radicalism. It is possible to retain religious extremism, while adopting a political conservatism characterized by “a disposition to preserve and an ability to improve.” Doing so will actually embody a certain return to tradition, a “Jewish conservatism” that combines civic involvement with a healthy distance from secular culture, personal advancement with community commitment, and modern living with deep devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*. This seems to be the challenge at hand.

In meeting the challenge, an essential quality that will be that of *yiras shamayim*, fear of heaven. Chareidim following a track of greater integration in Israeli society cannot rely on the social framework of traditional chareidi society for upholding their religious praxis. In truth, nobody can—at least nobody who wants his actions to be infused with religious meaning. But while the mainstream chareidi individual has a strong safety net to fall into, this cannot be said for the “integrator,” who also faces religious challenges for which his insular education often leaves him unprepared. Cultivating an inner religious conviction among those seeking greater integration, expressed outwardly in terms of punctilious mitzvah observance and a continued dedication to Torah study,⁶⁰ is therefore an essential part of the challenge.⁶¹ Given this conviction, those making the journey toward civic participation will find it easier to separate between the religious extremes of chareidi society and political conservatism. There is no reason why a person radical in his *yiras shamayim* should also be a political radical.

Echoing Moshe Scheinfeld’s call for a youthful rebellion of children against parents, the call of those traversing this route will be for transition from youth to adulthood, from a narrow fixation on rebuilding and consolidating to a broader sense of responsibility that combines the elevated principles of chareidi life with an earthly citizenship. As the pioneering spirit of Scheinfeld’s day settles, they will demonstrate that the unprecedented achievements of chareidi society can reach beyond the “state of

⁶⁰ An important effort in this field in the *Achvat Torah* project, which has established several purpose-made Torah study environments for working chareidi men. In terms of the broader Israeli awareness, however, the idea of combining a deep and dedicated chareidi identity with a deep civil involvement remains undeveloped.


⁶¹ The important educational issues this challenge raises are, of course, beyond the scope of this article.

emergency.”⁶² They will provide not only physical, but even spiritual sustainability.

Significant challenges force us to understand ourselves better. The clever formulation of Peter Berger comes to mind, whereby

[t]he facticity of the social world or of any part of it suffices for self-legitimation as long as there is no challenge. When a challenge appears, in whatever form, the facticity can no longer be taken for granted. The validity of the social order must then be explicated, both for the sake of the challengers and of those meeting the challenge. [...] The seriousness of the challenge will determine the degree of elaborateness of the answering legitimations.⁶³

As many in the chareidi community reach a crossroads of sorts, the time is surely ripe for renewed thought and reflection that will clarify the meaning of being chareidi, distinguish between its religious, ideological and sociological components, and define boundaries for those individuals whose groundbreaking paths require them. Ignoring recent developments in the chareidi space—specifically, the entry of many into academia and the workforce, and the underlying causes of this continuing trend—risks waking up to a wild and spontaneous growth with only loose connections to its chareidi roots. It is a time that demands a leadership—Torah, intellectual and political—ready to meet the challenge.

In the present article, I sought to frame the issues involved in terms of conservatism versus radicalism, hoping that this might be useful in deepening our perspective on the tensions inherent to recent trends within chareidi society. My most basic assumption is that an adjusted chareidi model cannot emerge from the ruins of the old: it must remain deeply chareidi, and build itself cautiously on the foundations of the existing model. Rather than a departure from tradition, it must embody a return to it. The challenge is delicate, and the stakes of meeting it—for chareidi society and for greater Israel—are high. It is both exciting, and a deep privilege, to be part of the effort. 

⁶² Naturally, those attacking this trend argue that the “state of emergency” is no less in force today than it was sixty or indeed two hundred years ago. Be this as it may, the trend toward greater involvement in broader Israel remains clear.

⁶³ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967), p. 31.