

# Finding a New Path

## Israel wakes up to the needs of ex-Haredim

By [Jennifer Richler](#) | November 16, 2018 12:00 AM

Leaving the ultra-Orthodox community is nothing new in Israel. Everyone, secular or religious, knows someone who used to be on, but is now “off the *derech*.” But the phenomenon hasn’t been well studied. Most of what we know comes from individual stories of people making the difficult transition from the insular Haredi world to mainstream Israeli society.

Now there is data to flesh out these stories, in the form of a report commissioned by the Israeli nonprofit [Out For Change](#). The report provides a picture of ex-Haredim in unprecedented detail, estimating how many people leave Haredi communities each year, and describing who they are and why they leave. It also discusses new programs to serve the needs of ex-Haredim, many of them partnerships between nonprofits and the Israeli government. Still, it argues that much more must be done to support ex-Haredim in the ways they deserve.

Previous attempts to study Haredi disaffiliation have been limited in scope. For example, a 2009 survey from Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics included a single question asking whether respondents’ level of religious observance had increased, decreased, or remained unchanged over their lifetime. The new report, which Out For Change co-CEO Yossi Klar called “the first major research about this phenomenon in Israel,” takes a broader and deeper approach.

Neri Horowitz, author of the report and chairman of the Agora Policy Think Tank, took on the topic from many angles. He conducted in-depth interviews with former Haredim, about 100 individually and 100 in focus groups. He also spoke to “almost every person involved in supporting ex-Haredim” in Israel, said Klar. This included directors at Out For Change and [Hillel: The Right To Choose](#), the other Israeli agency serving ex-Haredim, who provided data on the number of new people they serve each year. He interviewed less obvious sources, too, including welfare department employees in cities with large Haredi populations, who receive government subsidies based on the number of youth they’ve identified as “at risk,” many of whom are ex-Haredim.

Putting together the information from these different sources, Horowitz arrived at an estimate of about 1,000 people leaving Haredi communities in Israel each year, just under 10 percent of a typical age cohort of Haredim. Among those interviewed, the largest number said their main reason for leaving was the feeling that Haredi society is “broken.” People spoke of the social problems plaguing their communities, most notably poverty. Other reasons included religious doubts, the desire for greater freedom, and trauma, often resulting from physical or sexual abuse, and mental-health issues—none of which Haredi society is equipped to handle, the report stated.

The report found the largest group of ex-Haredim is made up of people from poor families “on the periphery of Haredi life”—mostly from the Breslov and Chabad branches of Hasidism, as well as smaller, predominantly Sephardi communities. The reason so many from these groups leave, the report speculated, is that their social mobility is very limited. The next largest group is composed of children of *ba’alei teshuva*, native and immigrant Israelis who become observant later in life. The report estimated that about 25 percent of this second generation becomes non-Haredi. Finally, the smallest group consists of non-Hasidic or “yeshivish” ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Although not a new phenomenon, the report noted that the trend for leaving Haredi society in Israel has accelerated over the past few decades. People on the inside have observed this uptick firsthand. When Hillel was founded in 1991, it was “very, very rare” for people to leave, said Yair Hass, the agency’s CEO. Moshe Shenfeld, co-founder of Out For Change and a former Haredi, agreed: Whereas he knew almost no one leaving when he made his exit 14 years ago, “today, no one in the Haredi community can say he doesn’t know at least one person leaving,” he said.

One of the main reasons for this increase, many believe, is poverty. The Israel Democracy Institute found that although the **poverty rate** among Haredim has declined slightly from its peak in 2008, it is still very high: In 2017, 54 percent of Haredim lived below the poverty line, compared with 22 percent of the general population.

Another important factor is the ubiquity of the internet and smartphones. Although they are technically forbidden in the Haredi world, “people find a way” to get online, Hass said, which gives them access to an entire world that had been off limits. In fact, he says, 80 percent of the hits to Hillel’s website come from smartphones.

Finally, the number and variety of resources now available to ex-Haredim have made it easier for people to leave, Horowitz said. “There’s now a network of people you can call and say, ‘I’m coming to sleep on your couch for a week,’” he said.

Klar and Horowitz also credited Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, who succeeded Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman as the leader of Israel’s ultra-Orthodox community, with reducing the stigma of leaving. In 2017, he appeared in a **video** urging parents not only to accept, but to embrace children who go off the *derech*. In his view, those who leave the fold are “forced to sin,” incapable of making the right decision at this time in their lives. Parents must accept their children as they are, he said, without limitations or conditions, and hope that this warm and respectful approach will lead their children back onto the “right” path. “This is a game changer, because he’s the biggest rabbi in the Haredi world,” said Klar. “It’s going to change the way people react to their kids.”

Many insiders believe that as a result of these forces, the trend for leaving the Haredi community will continue to gather steam. As Klar put it, “When it stops dripping, it starts pouring.”

Although experts acknowledge that the rise of the “**modern Haredi**”—someone who lives a strict ultra-Orthodox lifestyle while participating in mainstream Israeli life through work, education, or army service—has, in theory, made it possible for Haredim to have it all, most think it won’t stem the flow of people leaving. “Being modern Haredi is very demanding, and it’s not legitimate in the eyes of the

ultra-Orthodox,” said Horowitz. “Some people will say, ‘Might as well go all the way’” to becoming secular.

Even those who manage to strike a balance between Haredi and modern lifestyles will see their children become less observant over time, Horowitz predicted. Hass agreed: “As people become more open to the modern world, they tend to become more secular,” he said.

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For many advocates, the new report reinforces what they’ve been saying for years: The community of ex-Haredim is growing. And it is in dire need of more support.

For many years, Hillel was the only organization providing that support. Over the years, it has expanded its services, with centers in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa that offer everything from individual therapy to courses in Hebrew and computers to vocational counseling to social activities.

Starting in 2015, Hillel partnered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to offer emergency shelter to ex-Haredim, eventually moving them to transitional apartments and helping them find long-term housing. The government also started funding Hillel’s three centers, allowing them to offer more programs and services.

A relative newcomer to the ex-Haredi support scene is Out For Change, founded in 2013, and funded by the Schusterman Foundation, Leichtag Foundation, and the National Insurance Institute. Initially, the nonprofit focused on advocacy and policy change, making headlines in 2015 when it sued the government on behalf of 52 ex-Haredim for failing to provide them with a basic secular education. Although that case is still working its way through the courts, Klar said that the lawsuit has already accomplished its main goal: getting the government to pay attention to the needs of ex-Haredim. “Now that we’ve raised awareness of this issue, every government ministry is talking to us,” he said.

Because of its success with advocacy, the organization decided in 2017 to shift its focus to offering services directly to ex-Haredim. “We thought, ‘Why don’t we provide the help we know is needed?’” Klar said. They approached officials in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs about a project, called HaSalon (The Living Room) to create community centers for ex-Haredim in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Jerusalem center opened in January 2017 and the Tel Aviv center has just started offering its first programs, Klar said.

One of the main goals of HaSalon, said Naftali Yawitz, a ministry official working on the project, is to give ex-Haredim a sense of belonging. “Most experience a lot of loneliness,” he said. “They don’t know anyone in the secular world, and they’re often estranged from their families.” The centers will address that issue by hosting social events, such as movie nights, which will also help ex-Haredim fill cultural gaps that come from living in a closed society. The Jerusalem center, for example, recently screened *Halfon Hill Doesn’t Answer*, a 1970s Israeli cult classic and satire of the Israel Defense Forces.

Cultural deficits are something Yawitz, who left his Haredi community at the age of 15, understands well: “To this day I have gaps,” he said, in his knowledge of mainstream Israeli culture. A reference to a beloved Israeli kids’ TV show, for example, will go right over his head.

There are many other gaps the centers' programs will help fill, including the obvious ones in computers and conversational Hebrew, but also in social skills, such as how to talk to members of the opposite sex, Yawitz said. The idea behind HaSalon, is to provide people with a "buffet of services" they can choose from, based on their unique needs, Klar explained. "Some people are fine socially, but have no idea how to write a resume," he said.

In his report, Horowitz noted that these programs are positive developments, but argued that the government must do much more to support ex-Haredim, particularly in the areas of housing, education, and employment. Those who leave the Haredi community, he and many other advocates have argued, are entitled to the same services and benefits as those who remain. For example, Horowitz said, the government provides funding for Haredim to receive vocational training, but not for ex-Haredim. In order to receive many benefits, "they have to masquerade as Haredim," he said. Out For Change has had some success in changing these policies, he noted, but much more still needs to be done.

And that's not where the government's obligation ends, Horowitz argued in his report. It must also do more to provide for the unique needs of those making the difficult transition to mainstream Israeli society, he said—for example, by increasing support for mental-health services and for programs that expose ex-Haredim to Israeli culture.

Advocates see ex-Haredim as a group with much to contribute—if only they get the support they need to thrive. Many are doing cutting-edge creative work, Horowitz said, pointing to [Victoria Hanna](#), who grew up in a Sephardi Haredi home and is now a "kabbalistic rap" artist, and [Yehonatan Indursky](#), creator of the hit Israeli TV show [Shtisel](#), about an ultra-Orthodox family in Jerusalem. Klar noted that many of his ex-Haredi friends are studying to become doctors, computer programmers, and hi-tech entrepreneurs.

To Hass, it's not surprising that ex-Haredim are such high achievers. "These people ... were willing to take responsibility for their lives, to pay a price for what they believe in," he said. "This group is the future of Israel."

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*Jennifer Richler is a freelance writer living in Bloomington, Indiana.*

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