



Yohai Hakak. *Young Men in Israeli Haredi Yeshiva Education: The Scholars Enclave in Unrest*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012. VIII, 190 S. \$133.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-23469-7.

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Published on H-Judaic (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

## The Crisis of Yeshiva Education

Yohai Hakak's *Young Men in Haredi Yeshiva Education* is a fascinating book. It discusses the deep transformations currently taking place in the hub of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society—the yeshiva (an educational institution for the religious study of Jewish texts). The ability of Haredi society to reconstruct itself after the Holocaust in the State of Israel was remarkable; however, with its increased size, new challenges developed, most notably the financial crisis that undermined its very existence. Hakak's book draws our attention to another crisis that is taking place in the educational system, a challenge that poses no lesser threat to the Haredi community in Israel. Haredi society is trying to sustain its institutions and lifestyle; however, in reality the yeshiva system is about to explode.

Hakak was a journalist covering Haredi society in the Israeli press. In preparing this new scholarly work, he used his previous connections to perform his research, to gain access to a yeshiva and interview the students. As a university-trained anthropologist, he was able to pass beyond the barrier of written literature and to communicate with his research subjects. This is not an easy job, because when it comes to a small religious enclave like the Haredi neighborhoods of Jerusalem, outsiders are viewed with suspicion.

The first two chapters of the book discuss methodology and offer a literature review. Hakak's discussion of the Haredi struggle between body and soul in the third chapter is very interesting. The Haredi ideal is the devotion of men's lives and bodies to God. Therefore, Haredi men are required to develop an ability to control and discipline the body and its needs. Haredi education devotes a lot of energy to restraining the masculine identity, and to declare that men's greatest powers come from his wisdom obtained by Torah studies. The Torah student needs to perform the work of God for its own sake, and not with the expectation of any mundane prizes. The mate-

rial world is rejected by most of the rabbis. The soul is superior, it is actually the divine part. The task of man is to help his soul approach God as closely as possible. In order to attain access to the supernatural world, the individual must restrain and control his body.

After reading Hakak's chapter, I was left with a few unanswered questions: As much as the body is portrayed as a source of evil and suffering, Judaism does not support celibacy. How do young adults overcome the discrepancy between the drives of their lustful bodies, and their actual need to use them in order to construct families? Does it transform their attitude toward their bodies? In addition, Hakak's description reminded me of some Hindu concepts. Hinduism also developed a strong disdain for the human body, the carrier of the divine spark. This chapter might have benefited from a cross cultural comparison.

The fourth chapter brings us into the main topic of the book—the growing number of dropouts in the Haredi educational system and the various tactics Haredi educators use in order to stop this trend. The heart of the problem lies in the ideal of equality. In the early 1950s, when the Haredi community was small and fragile, the yeshiva was constructed as a place for all children to attend. It was intended to limit student access to all types of secular studies in order to confine their education to Torah studies. The daily schedule in a yeshiva is very intensive and it keeps the students' entire day rigidly structured. Although the yeshiva, as an institution, was intended to develop elite Torah sages, since all the children in the community attend, the result is often mediocrity. The situation where only a few will turn into sages, with all the material benefits that come with it, like a good *shiduch* (fixed marriage) with a girl from a wealthy family, makes competition inevitable. How do Haredi rabbis protect the students, especially the weaker ones, from harsh competition and eventual dropout? Since the rab-

bis want to keep every boy in the yeshiva, they have developed all kinds of rhetorical responses, arguing that it is better for all students to stay in the yeshiva, even in poverty and mediocrity, because this is their path to spiritual achievement in this and the next world. The biggest question I had after reading this chapter was, do the graduates of this educational system “buy” the rabbis’ rationalizations? How long would they agree to accept a system that offers no hope, without rebelling? Are we about to witness a “Jewish Spring” because of this?

The following chapter discusses Haredi historiography. Writing history was never considered overly important in traditional Jewish literature, until the rise of Enlightenment. Afterwards, historiography became one of the tools in the Haredi struggle against modernity. Until recently, Haredi historians described their rabbis almost as angelic, flawless men, who devoted their lives to the worship of God, without blemish. However, from the 1990s on, a new trend has developed. Some of the rabbis’ weaknesses are discussed in the literature, at least if they were the errors of youth, before the rabbi was recognized as a sage by the Haredi community. Hakak argues this shift results from the inability of the marginal groups to continue to believe in the perfection of their rabbis; they developed a sense of skepticism toward Haredi rhetoric. According to Hakak, Haredi historiography is simply a manipulation that keeps students inside their yeshivas. It gives the youth role models with whom to identify. The rabbis were human figures who were not perfect in their adolescence, but grew to become great men, just like the young readers of their biographies

The sixth chapter discusses the cracks in the current Haredi system. Student rebellion is discussed, with many examples. The rebellion against the strict code of dress is manifested through the use of brand-name clothes. While restraint and passivity are considered the ideal of the culture, a new body culture is growing in which martial arts are becoming trendy. Outsiders, like immi-

grants from America and *hozsrim bitshuva* (newly observant students), bring new approaches to the body, and participation in sports has penetrated the yeshiva. Young yeshiva students are beginning to understand that the body itself has needs, which are not identical with the spiritual. The yearly vacation period is the time where the students have the ability to celebrate their freedom by using their body for non-Haredi study. Many go on dangerous trips in order to change their atmosphere. In this chapter, Hakak gave us small examples of this rebellion, which threaten to break the structure of the yeshiva system.

The last chapter of his book discusses new discourse among Haredi educators who are more welcoming of doubt, reflections, and psychology. He shows how the new educators promote student expression of their frustrations and challenges. They use psychological tools to advise their students, and they even promote more democratic relationships between parents and children, as well as between teachers and students. However, one should not think that this is an innocent attempt to offer assistance to the young men that are pressured by this highly demanding society; on the contrary, according to Hakak, this is yet another tool used by rabbis to figure out where defection is being considered, and to manipulate students, in order to keep them from dropping out.

Hakak’s book is a great scholarly achievement. It outlines the various methods that the Haredi education system uses to keep their society as is, while introducing only minor changes, which are mostly just rhetorical. Will this be enough for those who want to see the community preserve itself? Can the Haredi society maintain itself in the face of the economical and educational crisis in Israel? I wish Hakak could have answered these questions. Still, this book offers readers a chance to observe this community from within. It is a great achievement in the study of religious enclaves.

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**Citation:** Motti Inbari. Review of Hakak, Yohai, *Young Men in Israeli Haredi Yeshiva Education: The Scholars Enclave in Unrest*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

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