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The Position of Haredi Women in Israel: Perceptions of Equality in Orthodox Families

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Chapter 30
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The status of the Haredi woman today is clearly a direct consequence of the development of Haredi society as a whole within open western society, particularly since the end of the Second World War. Haredi society is commonly but erroneously considered...
of the Second World War. Paradoxically, it is these very changes in status that fostered the impressive strengthening of Haredi society and enabled the development of what I call a 'scholar society', a society in which the decisive majority of men are Torah scholars who attend full-time yeshivas and kollels for at least five to ten years.

The development of Haredi Judaism after the Second World War can only be understood and explained against the background of changes in the status of girls and women. The Haredi woman raised in the west, or in Israel, indeed differed from her modern counterpart, the non-religious Jewish woman, in many respects. Yet, at the same time, she also resembled the contemporary, normal religious woman more than she did the traditional one. Furthermore, the change in the status and role of women that enabled the development of the new Haredi society, is closely linked with the development of modern society as a whole and can only be addressed within this broader framework.

The turning point occurred after the establishment of the State of Israel with the inclusion of Agudat Israel, the main Haredi political party, into the country’s political system, the enacting of the compulsory education law, and the establishment of Agudat Israel’s educational system comprising most Talmudei Torah, for boys, and Beit Ya’akov schools, for girls, both with full state financing. The great wave of immigration in the young state demanded vast numbers of teachers, male and female. Thus, all graduates of the Beit Ya’akov teachers seminary were able to find teaching positions. With the increase in the numbers of teachers, not at least in a decade, a teaching job was virtually assured for every Beit Ya’akov seminary graduate. Thus, at age 18 a Haredi woman could already have a job and a modest but secure salary.

By the mid-1950s the Beit Ya’akov seminary had become an encouraging and influential factor in all aspects of Haredi life. One might have expected the proliferation of professional Haredi women to engender a greater open-mindedness to modernity and a change in attitude toward general education in Haredi society. In fact, many teachers do serve as a bridge between Haredi and Israeli modern society, thereby fulfilling a critical role in the adjustment of Haredi society to open western society.

Paradoxically, graduates of the Beit Ya’akov seminary contribute significantly to the reinforcement of traditional education institutions for men, primarily the sacred yeshiva at which only religious subjects are studied. These women themselves contribute to the development of their milieu as a scholar society characterised by its closed-mindedness and introversion. These conflicts and dialectic development can be explained only in terms of Israel’s development as a modern democratic welfare state. Furthermore, the process cannot be described without mentioning the activities and influence of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Perelitz, known as the Chazon Ish, and Avraham Yosef Wolf, Dean of the Beit Ya'akov...
teachers seminary in the Haredi city of B’nai Berak. The Chazon Ish, more than any other religious personality, influenced graduates of yeshivas to devote themselves to Torah study as a personal fulfiment ideal incumbent on all Jewish men without exception. It was the Chazon Ish who conceived the continued kollel study after marriage as a necessary component of the young Haredi man’s socialisation process. To realise these objectives, and render the kollel acceptable to all, one had to prevent the assumption of a monastic nature. Kollel studies were presented as a condition for a happy marriage, enabling the maintenance of a family at a reasonable standard of living. On a practical basis, young Haredi women who graduated from Beit Yadwiser seminaries were encouraged to marry a yeshiva student who would devote himself to several years of kollel studies, with the wife bearing the principal burden of earning a livelihood. The unprecedented emergence of Haredi women with full-time jobs and secure, respectable salaries appears ideal for such a relationship.

The new function assumed by Haredi women and the changes of division of labour between husband and wife give rise to a new source of conflict for which an appropriate solution must be found. For example, a working woman has a more rigid schedule than her kollel scholar husband, creating a new situation in which a husband often fulfils many housekeeping and childrearing functions which are reserved exclusively for women in traditional society. The role-reversal constitutes the potential source of most interpersonal and ideological tensions. The scholar husband must display readiness to fulfil ‘female’ functions even though he may fear that these functions will prevent him from devoting time to Torah study.

The problem is becoming far more evident among families in the Haredi society. Haredi women are increasingly enjoined to recognise the implication of asking their husbands for assistance with the housework and with raising children. Over the past few years many books and pamphlets have been published on the relationship between the Haredi kollel scholar husband and his working wife. These publications urge the woman to allow the husband to devote as much time as possible to his studies; at the same time, the man is enjoined to respect his wife, appreciate her contribution, and attempt to fulfil her wishes within accepted limits. These books prove that Haredi families are attempting to cope with the changes in their society which result partly from the comprehensive change in the education and status of the Haredi woman, both within and outside the family unit.

A serious problem facing Haredi society is finding enough jobs for women, whose financial contributions constitute the backbone of the schaar society. The effects of general unemployment have created a major crisis in Haredi society.
Haredi society is marred by contradictions partly originating in the woman's dialectic function and the consequent disintegration of traditional employment barriers. The solution to this problem is by no means simple. Today Haredi women are a highly influential and encouraging factor in their society's adjustment to the surrounding society. Paradoxically, however, this partial adjustment aids Haredi society with the challenge of coping with modernity and the maintenance of its greatest achievement, the scholar society.

A close social analysis reveals that this development was connected with various unique circumstances, themselves a consequence of the establishment of the State of Israel as a modern welfare state, a change in attitude to Jewish tradition among Jewish societies in Israel, and the western Diaspora that occurred after the Holocaust. Will the changing circumstances sparking a crisis in the scholar society also alter the Haredi woman's function within her own society and the surrounding one? Whatever the answer to this question, the Haredi woman is undoubtedly a dynamic factor in fostering change in all aspects of life within Haredi society.