SHORESH
Institution for Socioeconomic Research

Changing the paradigms

Policy Brief

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Doing (learning) the math in Israel

Conflicting demographic trends and the core curriculum

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Abstract

Mobility between Jewish religious streams in Israel and fertility rates are ostensibly pushing Israeli demography in conflicting directions. A greater number of Jewish Israelis are choosing to become less religious than those choosing to become more religious. On the other hand, differences in fertility rates are having the opposite effect. This policy brief combines a number of datasets to examine the overall direction that Jewish Israelis are headed – and it is a very clear one. Very high Haredi retention rates (88%) and extraordinarily high fertility rates (7.1 children per family) ensure that there is currently only one direction that Israel is headed, and very quickly so. The importance of a correct understanding of the direction that Israel is headed – and its implications for present-day national policies – cannot be overstated when the majority of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) children are currently being deprived of a complete core curriculum that would provide them with the ability to sustain a competitive economy and a democratic society.

Background

The conventional paradigm concerning Israeli demographics to date has been one of ensuring that Israel's Jewish population maintains a significant majority to preserve the country's Jewish identity and democratic foundations. That paradigm is outdated. Arab-Israeli fertility rates are falling while Jewish-Israeli birthrates are rising, firmly entrenching

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today's substantial Jewish majority. Not only is the conventional paradigm obsolete, it obscures the real demographic challenge that Israel needs to understand and deal with today. The internal evolution within Israel's Jewish population will not only determine the country's future character, it will literally determine its existence.

Much of the public discourse on the changing Jewish-Israeli demographic picture is often based on anecdotal evidence which is – by nature – partial, and often misleading. Examples highlighted in newspaper columns, the electronic press and social media provide a steady stream of localized stories that tend to amplify pre-existing beliefs, but do little to provide a robust and coherent picture of the overall demographic direction that Israel is headed. Some end up feeling that there is encroaching proselytization with varying degrees of success in compelling Jews to become more religious while others fear that increased exposure to secular norms is a real threat to religious lifestyles that is leading Jews away from religious observance.

This policy memo provides a seminal big picture perspective of the developing demographic dynamics between Jewish-Israeli streams. Findings and projections from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (2017) are merged with Hleihel (2018) to produce a broad picture, providing context for the underlying changes and the overall direction that Israel's leading policy-makers from across the political spectrum need to understand and internalize.

Getting the big picture right on Israel's evolving demographics has ramifications far beyond placating/alarming one side or another. When juxtaposed with Israel's unique policy of denying some its pupils a compulsory common core curriculum – the only country in the developed world not to mandate core studies for all children – the result is a combustible combination with existential challenges for Israel's future alongside some vitally important policy implications for present-day Israel,

Very high retention rates for Haredi and secular Jews

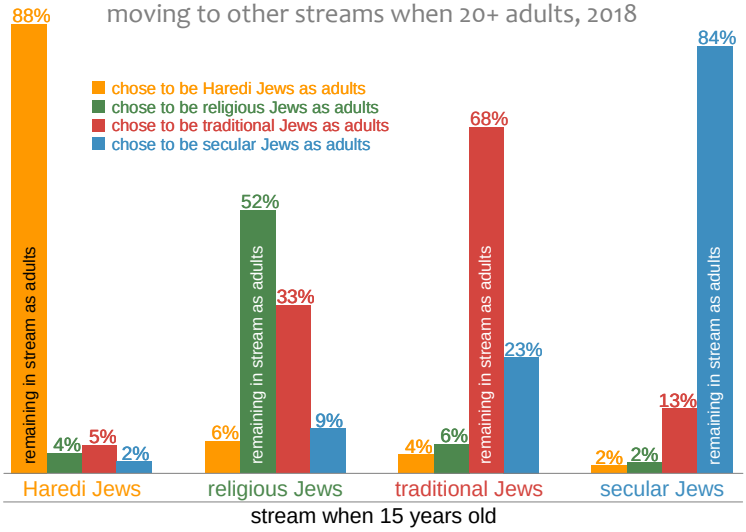
The vast majority of Israeli Jews self-identify with one of four primary religious streams. The least religious are the secular Jews, though many secular Jews observe some aspects of Jewish traditions. At the other end of the religious spectrum are the Haredim[2], or ultra-Orthodox Jews. The Pew Research Center (2016) notes that Haredim "are generally highly observant of Jewish religious law (halakha), and they express a strong preference for a state in which religious law would take precedence over democratic principles." Religious Jews, or Dati'im in Hebrew, are very observant, but take a much more active role in Israel's society, economy and military than do the Haredim. The final stream includes what are referred to as traditional Jews (Masorti'im in Hebrew), with highly diverse levels of observance running the gamut between religious and secular Jews.

The two religious streams at the polar ends of the Jewish spectrum exhibit very little mobility out of each. Specifically, 88% of those growing up as Haredim in Israel choose to remain Haredim as adults while 84% of those growing up as secular Jews retain that distinction as adults (Figure 1).[3] Only 4% of those who grew up as Haredim leave to become religious Jews while another 5% become traditional Jews. Only 2% of those raised as Haredim move all the way to the other side and become secular Jews.

Figure 1

Retention vs intergenerational mobility between Jewish-Israeli religious streams

Share of those remaining in stream and shares of those moving to other streams when 20+ adults, 2018



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

At the other end of the spectrum, 13% of persons growing up as secular Jews become traditional Jews, while 2% choose to become religious Jews and another 2% become Haredi Jews.

[2] "Haredim" is the Hebrew word used when referring to Haredi Jews in plural form.

[3] Findings by Pew (2016) did a similar study on mobility between Jewish streams in Israel were very similar to those highlighted here from the Central Bureau of Statistics Social Survey (2018).

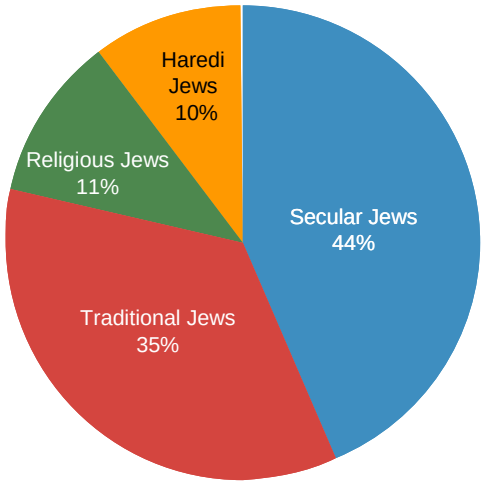
Traditional Jews are much less effective in retaining subsequent generations than either the Haredi or secular Jews. Just over two-thirds (68%) of those growing up as traditional Jews choose to continue as such in adulthood while nearly a quarter (23%) become secular Jews, with only 6% and 4% going in the other direction and choosing to become religious Jews and Haredi Jews respectively. The attrition rate among Israel's religious Jews is the highest, with roughly one-half (52%) maintaining that distinction as adults. While 6% become even more religious, choosing to become Haredim, the remainder move in the other direction. One third of the religious Jews become traditional Jews while 9% become secular Jews.

On the face of it, this might appear to suggest that Israel's Jewish population is gradually shifting toward the two polar extremes, even if the process takes a number of generations for future generations to coalesce within either the Haredi stream or the secular stream. The latter seemingly holds the advantage as the religious move toward the traditional, who in turn move to the secular. In light of the fact that that the secular Jewish stream is Israel's largest (Figure 2) while the Haredi stream is the smallest of the four, the intergenerational mobility could appear to confirm that Israel is headed towards a largely secular Jewish society with a small but permanent Haredi stream.

Figure 2

Distribution of adult Jewish-Israelis*

Shares out of 20+ Jewish-Israeli population, 2018



* Jews comprise 78% of Israel's 20+ population.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Pew, "Israel's Religiously Divided Society" (2016)

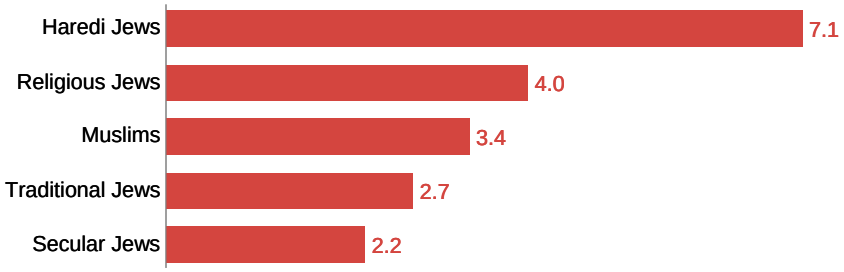
Fertility differences far outweigh mobility between streams

The above analysis does not take into account one very important determinant in the process: there exist very large differences in the fertility rates of the streams. Traditional Jewish families in Israel average 2.7 children versus 2.2 among secular Jewish families (Figure 3), or roughly a quarter more children per family – which offsets much of the ensuing

intergenerational mobility from traditional to secular Judaism. Fertility rates of 4.0 children among religious Jews are nearly double the rate among secular Jews. Thus, while only half of the religious Jews remain in that stream as adults, their high birthrates compensate for that attrition.

Figure 3

Fertility rates in Israel, 2017



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics and Hleihel (2018).

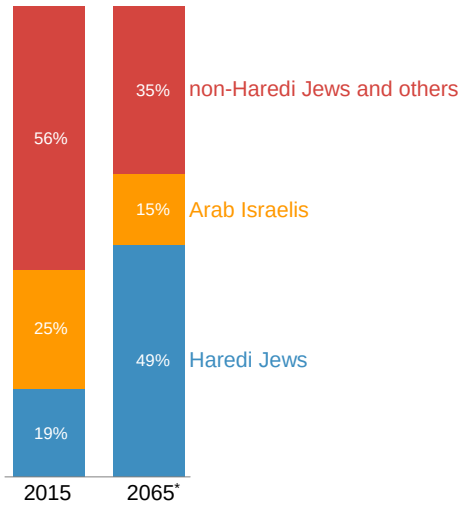
While few non-Haredim choose to become Haredim in later years, the combination of 7.1 children per birthing-age woman (a fertility rate that has been rising in recent years) and the extremely low attrition rates in subsequent generations means that this stream will grow exponentially over time and dwarf all of the others. This is corroborated by population projections made by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. Haredi children accounted for 19% of all Israel's children in 2015 (Figure 4). Their grandchildren are expected to be nearly one-half (49%) of Israel's children in 2065.

Aside from the fact that Israel's rapidly changing demographics augur significant changes for the future nature of the nation, these also have major ramifications for policies that need to be put in place today. Haredi children, primarily the boys, are deprived of a core curriculum in school beyond eighth grade (and even what is studied until that level is partial and rudimentary at best). Israel is the world's only developed country that permits parents to deny their children basic tools that they will need to work in a modern, competitive economy and to function in a modern democratic society.

Figure 4

The Children of Israel – A look at the future

children ages 0-14 in each religious sector as share of total



* Midpoint projection.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

There are no shortcuts in education

There is a tendency by many in Israel to presume that the Haredim finally understand the predicament and are beginning to change. The flood of data inundating the formal and social media makes it difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff, to understand whether or not sporadic anecdotal evidence is indeed representative of an entire society. But the evidence that does exist suggests that whatever changes have been occurring, they are irrelevant for the most part, because they are occurring too late in life.

Rates of employment among Haredim are higher today than they were a decade and a half ago, while substantially more Haredim are attempting the academic track. These are clear indicators that at the grass-roots level, something is indeed occurring among Haredim in Israel. But these important changes need to be examined within the much broader context.

Over 80% of prime-working age (35-54 years old) Haredi men were employed in the late 1970s. This plummeted to under 40% by the turn of the millennium. The significant cut in welfare benefits during Israel's massive recession during the Intifada forced large numbers of very poorly educated and unskilled Israelis to seek employment – among them, Haredim. Employment rates among Haredi men then proceeded to rise, surpassing the 50% mark. In recent years, with government benefits rising once again, employment rates among Haredi men have stagnated. Nonetheless, the fact that greater numbers of Haredim entered the workforce has more than likely contributed to a substantial increase in the number of Haredim entering the academic track.

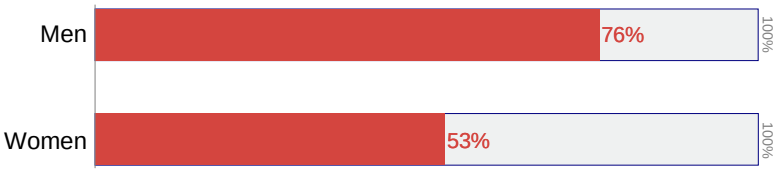
Part of the increase in the number of Haredi students is simply due to the rapid growth of the Haredi population. Moreover, only 30% of the Haredi students are men, so this phenomenon is far from a general characterization of Haredi society. Finally, entering the academic track does not guarantee its completion – thus illuminating the gravity of the primary problem. The education that Haredim receive as children is so deficient that half of the women and three-quarters of the men are unable to complete their degree (Figure 5), which is itself at an extremely low level in most of the colleges that they choose to attend. There are no such short cuts in life. It is simply not possible for the majority of a population

to skip serious core curriculum studies as children and then expect to be able to pick up afterwards like everyone else.

Figure 5

Haredi dropout rates from the academic track*

2011-2016



* includes academic preparatory programs.

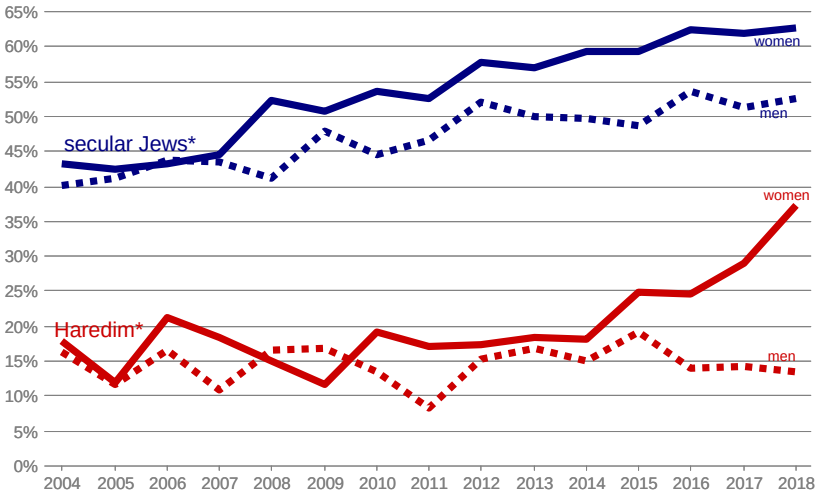
Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: State Comptroller's Office

While conventional wisdom – and Haredi politicians – often suggests otherwise, denying children the education that they need significantly reduces their chances of overcoming this shortcoming as adults. Thus, despite the substantial increase in the number of Haredim embarking on the academic track, the share of prime working age Haredi men – who were deprived a full core curriculum – with an academic degree has remained very low and unchanged over the past decade and a half when most of the purported change is presumed to have transpired (Figure 6). Even in the case of Haredi women, where there has been a steady increase in recent years, their most popular field – by far – is "education" at Israel's very sub-par teaching colleges (Israel's low quality teaching colleges are a major problem for non-Haredim as well).

Figure 6

Share of prime working age Israelis with academic degrees

ages 35-54, 2004-2018



* ultra-Orthodox Jews

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

In the United States, where core curriculums are mandatory for all, Haredim receive a much better education that enables them to go to college, to choose professional careers and to remain Haredim. Consequently, the share of American Haredim with an academic degree is twice that of Israeli Haredim (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Share of Haredim with an academic degree*, 2013

* Adults 18 and up in the US and 20 and up in Israel.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics and Pew Research Center

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Israel is situated on a socioeconomic trajectory that is unsustainable in the long run, unless fundamental changes in policies are implemented soon that can significantly change the country's current course. Already today, half the population is so poor that it does not reach the bottom rung of the income tax ladder and pays no taxes. Twenty percent of the population alone pay 92% of all Israel's income tax revenue, a share that is steadily rising since the 83% paid by the top two income deciles in 2000 (Ben-David 2019a).

With so many poorly educated and unskilled adults already in Israel – even excluding the Haredim, the country has one of the worst education systems in the developed world – Israel's labor productivity is one of the lowest in the developed world. As if this were not enough, the country's labor productivity has been steadily falling further and further behind (in relative terms) the leading G7 countries since the 1970s, contributing to an extensive brain drain among Israel's most educated and skilled individuals, upon whose shoulders much of the country's economic prowess currently rests (Ben-David 2019a).

The issue is not just an economic downturn or bankruptcy that may be on Israel's horizon. Being situated in one of the planet's most dangerous regions, Israel requires a first world army to simply continue to exist. Maintaining a first world army requires a first world economy. But roughly half of Israel's children (not just Haredim) are receiving a third world education, and they belong to the fastest growing population streams (Ben-David 2019b). As adults, they will only be able to maintain a third world economy, with all that this entails regarding Israel's future physical existence.

The socioeconomic challenges that Israel must begin dealing with seriously and systemically extend far beyond the focus of this policy brief. However, provision of a quality education to Haredi children through high school that includes a mandatory, full – and considerably upgraded – core curriculum is a necessary condition for Israel's physical survival. While this is not a sufficient condition for ensuring the country's existence, the Haredi birthrates ensure that nothing else will matter if their children do not receive the tools to maintain a first world economy. Israel needs Haredi children, along with children from all sectors of society to become the physicians, engineers and scientists that will keep Israel economically viable, physically healthy and safe from external threats.

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