

Ultra-orthodox Jewish Women Go to Work

Secular Education and Vocational Training as Sources of Emancipation and Modernization

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Abstract In the last three decades the ultra-orthodox community in Israel has experienced great changes in its internal social functioning. More specifically, these developments were linked to the education of ultra-orthodox women. Through an accurate review of the existing literature and a series of in-depth interviews with Israeli scholars, rabbis, educators and women of the ultra-orthodox community in Jerusalem, it was found that the introduction of new vocational and academic tracks in women's education, is gradually changing the internal social structure of the ultra-orthodox family and community. The main consequence is expressed in a modification of the traditional patriarchal framework and in a renegotiation of gender roles within the ultra-orthodox family and community.

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1 Introduction

In the last three decades the ultra-orthodox community in Israel has experienced great changes in its internal social functioning. Through an accurate review of the existing literature and a series of in-depth interviews to members of the ultra-orthodox (*haredi*) community in Jerusalem, this study will try to show how these transformations are linked to women's education. More specifically, it was found that the introduction of new vocational and academic training courses in women's educational tracks, is gradually changing the internal social structure of the ultra-orthodox family and community.

Since the late 1980s some fundamental ethnographical and anthropological studies have paid attention to the *haredi* community and its lifestyle, focusing on its social functioning and its religious traditions and rituals (Friedman 1991; Heilman 1992). However, all these studies concentrated mainly, when not exclusively, on the male part of the community, completely overlooking women or bestowing on them a secondary role. Numerous oth-

er ethnographical studies have been conducted especially to examine *haredi* politics and the ethnic divisions within the community (Shokeid 1995; Leon 2008; Caplan 2007; Abbas 2013); its economic situation (Bezalel 2006; Shiffman 2011) and so forth. In this respect, a special attention was reserved to formal and informal religious education, as one of the main tenets of *haredi* life (Bar-Lev 1991; Heilman 1992; Shiffer 1999; Maoz 2007). Yet, it was only towards the end of the 20th century that Israeli scholars began to publish studies on the *haredi* woman (El-Or 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997; Caplan 2003), its education (El-Or 1994) and, later on, on ultra-orthodox women vocational training and academic education, leading to employment (Lupu 2005; Ben Shahar 2009; Blumen 2002; Longman 2008; Garr, Marans 2001; Baum et al. 2013). Nevertheless, all the studies carried on thus far, have concentrated on a very limited sample survey and on very specific cases (Garr, Marans 2001; Baum et al. 2013), without considering the effects of women's education and employment on the ultra-orthodox community at large. In particular, the most significant study carried out on *haredi* women's education – *Educated and Ignorant: Ultra-orthodox Jewish Women and their World* by Tamar El-Or (1994) – is an ethnographical research on the education of *haredi* women, focusing on their life within the community and on informal education, rather than on schools, vocational training and gainful employment. Still it provides the reader with a clear idea and a vivid look on the life in a Gur Hassidic ultra-orthodox neighborhood, and on the traditional role of women as mothers and housewives.

Against this background, the aim of this research is to share some more light on the multifaceted feminine side of the *haredi* community, and identify key stages in the evolution of women's education, especially vocational training and academic education. The choice of focusing on women was made since they constitute a significant link in preservation mechanisms in the *haredi* community and at the same time they provide an indication of familial and societal processes of change occurring within it.

As a result, it will be shown how the developments within the *haredi* educational system mirror the bigger transformations that the entire ultra-orthodox community is undergoing, especially with respect to its internal functioning (power relations between men and women, education, work, the role of women etc.). More specifically, this research has two main objectives:

- to show how the *haredi* educational system for women has evolved in the last decades;
- to explain how the development in the education system changed the role of women within the *haredi* family and led to a renegotiation of gender roles.

First, through a review of the existing literature, an overview of the *haredi* community in Israel and of its educational system will be offered. Then the

look will shift to women and their role in the private and public sphere, with a specific focus on girls' educational system and its evolution. The innovative character of the research will be presented in the last part, through the results of a fieldwork activity carried out in Jerusalem in the summer of 2013. The paradox of women's education and the renegotiation of gender roles ongoing in the ultra-orthodox community, will be highlighted through the help of in-depth interviews with Israeli scholars, educators, rabbis and women from the ultra-orthodox community in Jerusalem. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and of their implications on the future of the *haredi* community in Israel.

1.1 Methodological Considerations

From a methodological point of view, all data and sources analyzed to develop the core of this research - i.e. the analysis of the professional and academic education of *haredi* women - can be divided in two categories: secondary sources and primary sources (Bruschi 1999). The majority of the sources I have considered in my research can be classified as secondary sources, i.e. sources whose data were collected for other purposes. These sources can be divided in: scientific publications, public surveys and surveys carried out by the public administration. As for scientific publications, it was only towards the end of the 20th century that Israeli scholars began to be interested in and to publish researches on the issue of ultra-orthodox women's vocational and academic training. However, the information and data obtained from these sources take into consideration a limited number of cases, and it is for this reason that I have decided to integrate them with other sources: public surveys - mainly those carried out by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics - and surveys carried out by the public administration, in particular those of the Israeli Ministry of Education. Concerning primary sources, to gather and analyze the most updated and reliable information on the situation of *haredi* women's education, I collected in-depth interviews with scholars and, in parallel, with rabbis, educators in the ultra-orthodox school system (particularly from *Bayt Ya'acov* institutions and the *Michlalah Haredit*), and with *haredi* women in Jerusalem. I chose to analyse those interviews from a qualitative point of view only, given the limited number of interviews collected.

Finally, it should be specified that the Israeli *haredi* community is composed of a great number of groups and subgroups (*hasidim*, *mitnagdim*, *Ashkenazim*, *Sephardim* etc.), which makes it impossible to examine all of them. Therefore this study presents mainly mainstream *Ashkenazi haredim*, while sometimes considering *Sephardi haredim* as well.

2 *Haredi* Judaism in Israel

Ultra-orthodox (in Hebrew, *haredi*) Judaism is the most traditional and conservative stream of orthodox Judaism. From an historical point of view, it has its origins in the crisis of Jewish culture, which occurred in the last half of the 19th century, in Eastern Europe. It developed as a response to the growing diffusion of reformism, assimilationism and secularization among European Jewry (Katz 1978). After the Enlightenment and Jewish emancipation, the Holocaust catastrophe completely erased the traditional socio-cultural milieu of Eastern European Jewish communities which resettled in the Land of Israel. These circumstances contributed, both from a political and a social point of view, to the process leading to the development of an increasing stringency, i.e. *haredi* Judaism (Heilman, Friedman 1991). From a political perspective, during time emerged a pattern of obedience to a rabbinic authority. Nevertheless, this pattern did not envision any collective leadership, and each group complied to the directives of a spiritual leader endowed with the *da'as Torah* (the knowledge of the *Torah*) (Heilman 1992, p. 25), regarding both religious and political matters. From a sociological point of view, the principal distinctive feature of the *haredi* community in Israel, shaping all other life spheres, is the penchant for self-segregation (Friedman 1991; Heilman 1992; Tikochinski et al. 2010), to the point of constituting a separate and all-encompassing society. This tendency manifests itself in a series of social behaviors and processes, such as:

- a strong emphasis on family as a social unit, and on family life;
- the very central social position given to *Torah* study and education as central pillars of the community life;
- a segregationist ethos with separate cultural language including: the segregation of sexes, a mandatory dress code for men and women, and a different jargon and idiom peculiar to each community.

Over the last thirty years a huge growth characterized the *haredi* community in Israel. The increasing number of sub-communities and sectors, with different ideologies and costumes, made very complex to give a definition of who and what is '*haredi*'. In fact, living in close proximity fosters mutual influences, conflicts and change among different *haredi* groups. Today the *haredi* community is divided into two main streams: *Ashkenazi haredim* of European or American descent, and *Sephardi haredim* of Asian or North African descent. These groups are not homogeneous in the slightest and are divided in their turn into many subgroups and communities. This ethnic division is made extremely evident by separate political parties and educational systems, with the purpose of protecting and recreating the ethno-cultural division above mentioned (Caplan 2007). In addition to

that, the external boundaries between the *haredi* community and the non-*haredi* are becoming more and more blurred, making the «overall *Haredi* 'territory' more inclusive» (Tikochinski et al. 2010, p. 8). The complexity in defining who is *haredi*, and the absence of official data on the community, makes it difficult to provide an exact estimate of their number. Analyzing the latest data available (CBS 2013), it can be roughly assessed that the *haredi* population makes up for about the 10% of the total Israeli population, which means approximately 800,000 people.

2.1 Education in the *Haredi* Community

Education is considered one of the main tenets of *haredi* life. At the center of the educational process, stands the child which, within the *haredi* community, plays a fundamental role as carrier of the ultra-orthodox legacy and tradition. The main objective of the educational enterprise is to preserve the uniqueness of *haredi* culture, at almost any price. However, in an open, modern and pluralist society, such as the present Israeli society, all sorts of negative influences threaten to besiege and bombard unprotected individuals such as children. This is the main reason why schools were created as «sanctuaries, cultural strongholds, a sheltered environment where external influences are institutionally controlled» (Heilman 1992, p. 171). The basic principle *haredi* education tries to inculcate in its youth is the segregationist ethos, emphasizing the difference between the *Torah* observant and everyone else (Tikochinski et al. 2010, p. 21). Education thus plays a double role: it is at the same time the main purpose of *haredi* existence and a barrier against the decay of the *haredi* way of life, provoked by modern and secular influences. Learning the *Torah* is considered not as a part-time occupation, rather as a full time preoccupation. Especially for boys it is considered to be an endless religious obligation, placed above all others. Accordingly, *haredi* attitude towards secular education, training and employment has been quite negative. In particular, after the Holocaust, each *haredi* man felt responsible for the preservation of Jewish culture and tradition by means of studying the *Torah*.

At present, the *haredi* community lives in a state of continuous repudiation of the secular - modern values of the surrounding Israeli society. Yet, its existence is only made possible thanks to, and within such a society. In fact, it is precisely this secular and modern society, providing State allocations and the deferral of the military service, that allows the existence of the *haredi* society as we know it, giving *haredi* men the chance to extend their period of study virtually for their entire life. As a matter of fact, what today is regarded as the traditional social organization of the *haredi* community - the so-called «society of learners» (Friedman 1991, p. 55) - did not exist in Israel up until the 1950s. In the first *haredi* communities, men used

to study until marriage and then leave the *yeshiva* (Talmudic academy, in plural *yeshivot*) to find a work and support their families. The turning point was the year 1953. With the adoption of the National Education Act, the State of Israel took upon itself the responsibility for education, including the funding of independent recognized institutions affiliated with the ultra-orthodox party *Agudat Israel* (Maoz 2007). This was the beginning of the society of learners, which allowed men to completely devote themselves to *Torah* study without working, thanks to State allocations, stipends and the financial support of a multitude of *haredi* women educated in *Bayt Ya'acov* schools - *Agudat Israel's* educational branch for girls - ready to marry and to support economically their husbands in their careers as *Torah* scholars.

The internal ethnic and political divisions within the ultra-orthodox community are also mirrored in its educational system, which is divided into various streams, and, most importantly, kept completely separate from secular, State education. Every group has its own institutions or even its own educational system. Reflecting the strict sex segregation in force within *haredi* society, schools are separated for boys and girls, running from pre-school through institutions of higher education, such as the *yeshiva* and the *kollel* (institution for advanced talmudic studies, in plural *kollelim*) for men, and seminars for young women.

As far as Israeli law is concerned, the *haredi* education system falls under the category of unofficial education. More precisely: recognized unofficial educational institutions and 'exempt' institutions (Shiffer 1999, p. 3). According to the degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the State, and their compliance to the core curriculum of the Education Ministry, these schools receive funding from the State of Israel. The two main recognized unofficial educational networks serving the *haredi* community are the Independent Education Network and the *ha-Ma'ayan* network. The former serving the *Ashkenazi* sector of the population, while the latter serves the *Sephardi* sector of the population, *haredi* and non-*haredi* alike. Finally, schools belonging to the second group, i.e. 'exempt' institutions, enjoy a wider degree of autonomy from the Ministry of Education. However, to receive State funding - on average half of the money allocated per pupil to State schools - these institutions have to comply to certain safety and health requirements.

At present, the *haredi* educational system includes institutions for every age level. Boys study mainly or only sacred subjects, while girls are allowed to take on secular studies such as foreign languages, computer science and accounting, and are tested in full matriculation examination (Shiffer 1999, p. 36). The educational track for male students is divided into five age groups, while for girls it is divided into four age groups. Boys attend kindergarten, or *heder*, up to age 5, where they learn to read and write. Afterwards, they proceed to a *Talmud Torah*, age 5 to 13, corresponding to a elementary school, where they study Bible in the lower grades,

commentaries and rabbinical analysis. From age 13 to age 16 boys transfer to a lower *yeshiva* or *yeshiva ketana*, where they study the *Talmud* all day long. At age 17 until marriage boys transfer again to the higher *yeshiva* or *yeshiva gedola*, where they spend on average some more four or five years, usually under boarding school conditions. After marriage they continue their studies in a *kollel*, a school for married men where they receive a small stipend as long as they are enrolled.

Concerning girls, in *Bayt Ya'acov* schools the educational track is divided into four age groups: kindergarten or preschool for children up to 5 years, continuing in elementary school, from 5 to 13, and then in secondary school, from 14 to 18. Finally, at the end of secondary school there is the possibility to continue with teacher-training courses. These courses will get the girls a degree as licensed teachers, or will allow them to attend professionalizing seminars in different subjects, such as computer technology and bookkeeping.

3 *Haredi* Women: The Private and Public Sphere

Life in the *haredi* community is based on an essentialist understanding of reality, as far as gender roles are concerned. According to this perception, biological and physical differences between sexes are determinant for the characterization of gender and family roles (Hardacre 1993, p. 129). Gender categorization is seen as a manifest, ongoing and explicitly significant for the course of the life. Therefore, the declared *haredi* ideology speaks of inequality between sexes, defined as «differentiation» (El-Or 2005, p. 134), and social roles and tasks are assigned accordingly. This view rests its basis on Jewish law, the *halakhah* (collective body of Jewish religious laws), which mirrors with its precepts and obligations (*mitzvot*) a gendered division of roles. According to the *halakhah*, men are obliged to fulfill a number of positive commandments, the most important of which is studying the *Torah*. Women, on the other hand, are exempted from the observation of most commandments and are entrusted with the care of the children and the household. Women are thus cut off from the main sources of power in *haredi* society – prayer and study – and relegated to the private, familial domain (El-Or 1993).

In the last decades – from 1990 to present – however, this ideology, based on the ‘natural order of things’, has been called into question on a daily basis by the reality surrounding the community, i.e. the modern Israeli society, of which the *haredim* are an integral part. This gap between the ideological framework and reality creates numerous tensions regarding women’s role both within the *haredi* community, and with respect to their relationship to the surrounding secular and modern society.

3.1 *Haredi* Women: Education, Training and Employment

The grounds for the rising of the discourse linking women's education and emancipation, lay in the history of *haredi* women educational system, especially in its rationale.

Until the end of the 19th century, girls' education used to be neglected among Jewish religious communities of Eastern Europe. Generally, girls attended secular public schools and learned the traditional knowledge they needed at home, from their mother. Yet this system proved to be ineffective. With the advent of Jewish enlightenment (*haskalah*) and assimilation, girls started to question Jewish religious values and traditions, and used their new secular education to influence the environment they lived in. The traditional figure of the modest Jewish woman and wife was about to change abruptly, with all the consequences such an upheaval could provoke (Weissman 1976). In this regard, Tamar El-Or writes: «The orthodox community was provoked into establishing formal education for women, in order to counter the process of secularization and general education that was experienced by most European Jews. [...] In attempt to circumvent the process of education, orthodoxy had no choice but to become part of it. *Haredi* women begun to study» (1994, p. 200). It is with these premises that the *Bayt Ya'acov* educational system for girls was founded in Poland at the beginning of the 20th century, and expanded itself to reach its present dimensions. The main aim of the *Bayt Ya'acov* system was, and still is, to form generations of women able and willing to enter the work force so to allow their husbands to devote all their time to study traditional religious texts. As previously explained, the structure of the educational track for *haredi* girls is almost the same, in terms of age partition, as that of boys. Differently from boys though, girls' education is organized, at least in theory, according to modern Western pedagogic methods. The *haredi* character is due to the enrollment, limited to *haredi* girls only, and to the curriculum of sacred studies, adapted to the *haredi* ideology. The curriculum gives priority to religious subjects both in terms of value, and in terms of hours dedicated. In general, subjects such as history and science are treated from the standpoint of the *haredi* community.

At first, in the 1950s and in the 1960s, *Bayt Ya'acov* institutions produced teachers for the *haredi* community school system. The data from the Labor Force Survey of the Central Bureau of Statistics prove that education is the main field of employment for *haredi* women. Especially in the age group 35-54, the share of *haredi* women employed in the education sector is 34.7%, versus a 16.7% of secular women of the same age group employed in the same sector. However, from the 1970s on, *Bayt Ya'acov* curricula gradually widened, teaching girls a range of clerical works. This happened because, due to the huge demographic growth of the community, the school system could not provide enough work opportunities for all of the *Bayt Ya'acov*

graduates. As a result, from the 1990s onwards, a growing number of women was employed outside the community in companies and institutions as secretaries, bookkeepers and so forth.

According to Jacob Lupu (2005), and his study on academic education and vocational training in the *haredi* sector in Israel, the year 1996 can be considered the turning point with respect to *haredi* attitude towards vocational training and employment. In fact, from the end of the 1990s on a certain acceptance of secular studies began to be felt within the ultra-orthodox community (Lupu 2005, p. 12). This was the consequence of a variety of social, economic and political factors, both internal and external to the community, that pushed it towards openness. Among them:

- the increasing poverty of most families associated to the restriction of income support payments and financial help from the family;
- the reduction of the age of exemption from army service for *haredi* men;
- the increasing number of young men not able, nor willing, to pursue *Torah* studies for their entire lives, thus having the necessity to find a job;
- a change in the fundamental values underpinning the *haredi* community and the penetration of the consumer culture even in this most conservative environment;
- the increased need for *haredi* professionals to serve the community;
- the will of the Israeli Government to make the *haredi* community more independent from an economic point of view.

In such a situation, the rabbis recognized the financial need of the community to earn its own living, but, at the same time, they wanted to control this potentially dangerous instrument - general education - and placed it under their jurisdiction and strict supervision, controlling all educational frameworks and institution offering vocational training and academic education to the *haredi* public. Furthermore, the development of *haredi* vocational training institutions was made possible also thanks to the Government's recognition of the need to include *haredi* population in the mainstream workforce, and the sponsorship of the Ministries of Labor, Industries and Commerce, Education and numerous non-profit organizations, such as the Joint, supporting Jewish education.

In particular, regarding women, the solutions devised to face the occupational crisis were mainly two. First, to channel women employment to a small number of other occupations that were considered suitable, such as sales within the community, or graphic and clerical jobs that could be carried out within the community or in telecommuting (Blumen 2002). The second solution devised was to make women employable also in the mainstream labor market. As a consequence, new vocational training tracks and

academic courses were opened to give young women the chance to acquire financial knowledge and technological skills. To prevent them from attending non-*haredi* institutions, a number of *haredi* colleges was established. These colleges, considered a solution to keep the girls within an *haredi* environment for the whole duration of their training, offer girls graduating from secondary school, the possibility enroll in vocational training or academic courses, where to achieve a post-secondary education.

At present, the institutions of higher education for *haredi* girls offer both vocational training and academic education according to the demand. To be suitable for the *haredi* public those institutions had to fulfill a series of conditions. Above all: an environment strictly *haredi* as for behavior, attire and times of prayer; and the organization of classes in separate locations, or in different days of the week for men and women. The institutions for girls' education, as those for boys, can be divided in: institutions for *haredim* only; *haredi* frameworks in religious institutions and *haredi* frameworks in secular institutions. The main difference among these types of institutions consists in the fact that the frameworks for *haredim* only are run under the supervision of a spiritual committee and of a rabbinical authority; while the others do not undergo any rabbinical supervision. From an academic point of view, all courses offered within the framework of the aforementioned institutions are conceived by recognized academic bodies, such as State colleges or universities, and thus approved, directly or indirectly, by the Ministry of Education. Among the courses offered by *haredi* colleges: social work, psychology, social sciences, medical laboratory science, management and dispute resolution, computer engineering and science, electro-optics engineering, computer science and so forth. The most renown institutions for *haredim* only, offering vocational training courses for girls are: the *Haredi Center for Technological Studies (ha-Merchaz ha-Haredi le-Hachsharah Mikzo'it)*; the *Haredi College of Bnei Brak (Mivhar or Michlalat Bnei Brak ha-Akademit)* and The *Haredi College in Jerusalem (ha-Michlalah ha-Haredit Yerushalaim)*.

Following the massive development of *haredi* colleges, parallel vocational training programs were established in *Bayt Ya'acov* seminars as well. This was done partially to maintain the educational monopoly *Bayt Ya'acov* had, and partially to counter the diffusion of institutions such as the colleges, not always strictly mainstream *haredi*. According to some interviews collected from *Bayt Ya'acov* educators, these new vocational training programs were not accurately planned at the beginning. However, in the last few years these programs, and the curricula more in general, are being updated and revised to adapt them to the demands of the modern world. As Tzipi, one of the women I interviewed – a former *Bayt Ya'acov* educator – said:

First of all they are trying to make a lot of things more attractive [...]

let's say for many years, for the girls who stayed there two more years to become a teacher or something [...] in a way it was very neglected let's say [...] not a lot of thought was put into it, not a lot of energy was put into it, not a lot of money was put into it. Now they are trying to make it really interesting and really attractive. Let's say before, if you wanted to study to be a teacher you could choose to study one subject, now if you study to be a teacher you study to be a teacher in math AND english AND literature AND[...] you really have an option to do something real about it. Or if you do computer engineering, you do it in a system at a very good level, you get out and you have a way into the labor market, or also graphic design or other subjects that once upon a time did not exist in the system. And this because there is such a pressure to move ahead. I have talked recently to the director who told me that now there is a big pressure to put in new subjects, just to keep the girls from going to other colleges that are, you know, getting control on the girls and they have a lot of influence on them. (Foscarini 2014)

The vocational training courses generally offered by *Bayt Ya'acov* institutions are: computerized office work, bookkeeping, architecture, interior design (Lupu 2005, p. 99). The distinctive trait of *Bayt Ya'acov* training programs is that girls are given the opportunity to take the certification examinations of the Ministry of Labor, thus obtaining an officially recognized degree to actually practice the profession they were trained to teach. It should be also specified that the vocational training programs in *Bayt Ya'acov* are always a complementary part to the teacher-training courses.

3.2 The Paradox of *Haredi* Women's Education and the Renegotiation of Gender Roles

At present, it can be said that women's education and participation to the workforce has become a permanent and essential feature of the society of learners. Yet, there is an evident clash between the figure of the modern, working *haredi* woman and the classical patriarchal paradigm where the ideal woman restricts her activities to the sphere of the household. In the *haredi* community, the primary male model - that of man learning *Torah* all his life - still holds a powerful place both in the communal life and the family sphere. Accordingly, the female model - that of an educated woman supporting financially the household - is purposely kept subordinated and dependent on male figures. «The ultra-orthodox modern discourse greatly influences the principles of the gender prestige system of the community» (Blumen 2002, p. 146), legitimizing the predominance of ultra-orthodox masculinity by rewarding men with public stipends for their study activity, while not recognizing women's primary unpaid role as mothers and house-

wives. In this respect, the concept of «educated and ignorant», referred to the *haredi* woman is illuminating. It was coined by Tamar El-Or (1994), and expresses at best the paradox women's education represents in the *haredi* world. On one side, girls' and women's education is considered a central task, with an important function of social control, requiring dedication and much efforts. On the other, it is defined as 'education for ignorance' for two main reasons. First, because, being denied access to the *Talmud*, women cannot be considered educated, according to ultra-orthodox standards. Second because, in spite of, and thanks to, the education given to them, women are expected to act as 'ignorant', staying faithful to the pre-assigned role of housewives and mothers they are given. According to the ethnographical study carried out by El-Or, this educational paradox characterizing women's literacy in *haredi* society operates on two levels. The first is defined «literacy for knowledge, through which women learn about the world in which they live», and the second, «literacy for ignorance, through which women learn how they are to behave in this world» (El-Or 1993, p. 72).

Therefore, within the paradigm of the society of learners, women are educated to be good wives and mothers and to keep a low profile: in a word to be modest. Modesty is considered one of the most important characteristics to understand the social and personal existence of the *haredi* women. As Tamar El-Or puts it: «the importance of a woman's reputation [given by its modesty] is an insurance policy that ensures that the woman will not take her contacts with the outside too far» (2005, p. 145). In fact, women are the main contact point with the surrounding, secular world and, as a consequence, they need to be educated in accordance with an ideal model which is the opposite of the feminine traits common to the surrounding society. Hence, the educational system for girls, is developed in line with these conceptions, to produce women capable of being the link between the community and the surrounding secular world, the main breadwinners of the family and, at the same time, preserving the community reputation. This aspect, concerning the preservation of women's reputation, is substantial, because women are considered responsible not only of the biological reproduction of the community, but, as essentially, of the reproduction of its cultural and symbolical dimension (Yuval Davis 1996).

In relation to women's reputation, it is interesting to highlight how, culturally, the *haredi* community gives full priority and much more credit to the profession of teacher. This is explained by the multiple advantages of working in the education sector for married women with children, and, above all, by the social balance it provides to the community. The main reason why teaching is such a respected profession, is the social control and moral supervision women are subjected to, both by their peers and the entire community. This viewpoint is also confirmed by some parents and educators working in the field of higher education in the *haredi* community.

During an interview, Hannah, a former principal of the *Michlalah Haredi*, confirmed this trend by saying:

Teaching was the best thing for women and it still is, it hasn't changed. I see my daughter's teacher, it is very good for women [...] it is the first thing a woman wants to do. It is changing, but still among men the *talmid chacham* (wise scholar) is the best, and among women the teacher is the best, this has not changed. (Foscarini 2014)

The interesting point and the main contradiction of this social system is that it is the same education women are given, and that is supposed to keep them 'ignorant', that allows them to negotiate over the boundaries between their role as mothers and housewives and their functions of mediators between the *haredi* community and the surrounding Israeli society, gaining more independence and freedom with respect to their social background, but still remaining grounded on it.

The situation developed significantly in the last two decades (1990s-2000s), where most school curricula were enhanced and a wider range of educational opportunities, especially vocational training tracks, were offered to *haredi* girls after high school. As a consequence, women had more chances to find a job outside the community, and this generated many internal issues and disturbances. Rabbis feared that women's employment outside the boundaries of the community, and their contact with the secular and 'corrupted' world, may lead them to wish to develop more independence, at the expenses of their traditional role, with the risk of changing well-established social values and norms. This scenery is confirmed by a number of interviews to *haredi* women. In most cases they consider women's paid work as just a tool, a means to achieve an end: allow their husbands to study and to become great *Torah* scholars. However, they seemed to have a positive attitude towards vocational training and work outside the community as well, considering them as empowering tools for women. This contradictory conception was made very clear to me during an interview with Tzipi, a very young woman and a former *Bayt Ya'acov* educator. She said:

My husband is not working and I am supporting, so all the girls are studying professions. But there are traditional professions like teacher [...] and other professions, within the normal [...] professions where you don't build a career [...] you work and it goes along with the family lifestyle [...] I mean, in the *Bayt Ya'acov* system you are taught profession you will be able to work with, but it's not geared towards the career. It is an interesting work, a satisfying work, but it's work, it's clear that your self-fulfilment is being a wife, a mother, it's just work. It's a tool. (Foscarini 2014)

But later she added:

There is a lot of talking about it [working outside the community]. First, the school system tries to prevent the girls [from working outside the community], which I personally think is wrong, and tell them you can make less money and keep intact your tradition and the purity of your family [...] and it's so much safer [...] and so forth [...] there is a lot of talking about it. (Foscarini 2014)

Another women, Shoshana, working in *Bayt Ya'acov* as well, when asked if she thought that a change in the curricula would have mirrored a change in the role *haredi* women play within the community, said:

This is a good question. I think that it is for sure mirroring some sort of change. I feel that women's position is strong to begin with, but this change is going to make her position even stronger, and I think this is going to change the way she sees her family. I think that more family planning is going to come now and that family sizes will shrink, families will change. Women are not just giving in to their husbands stupidity, they are going to have a more strong say, and more demands towards their husbands, I think it will change a lot. (Foscarini 2014)

The statements above, reveal a contradictory attitude *haredi* women have regarding work outside the community, and regarding their role with respect to family life and house management. From a theoretical point of view women are expected to put as their first priority their family and the household. However, it seems as though the discourse has shifted from a clear definition of borders between family and work on the part of *haredi* women, to a more fluid situation where women are looking in the first place for a more proactive role within the family, and secondly for a more fulfilling and satisfying job, allowing them to build a career of their own as well. Against this background, it can be definitely maintained that education has played, and is going to play, a big role both in relation to women's position, and with respect to their relationship with the Israeli society and the *haredi* community, changing the way young women perceive themselves and their social role.

Another big issue that emerged during the fieldwork is how *haredi* women are able to harmonize their role of mothers and housewives with their working life, at the same time keeping the family together. It appeared that this is made possible first and foremost, thanks to *haredi* women's great negotiation skills, allowing them, to reconcile the 'inner world' - that of house and family - with the 'outer', secular, working environment, even if at a great personal cost. A second strategy *haredi* women enact, even in a very implicit and indirect way, is to put more pressure on their husbands,

demanding greater domestic involvement on their part, in return for the financial support they provide to the family. Precisely these demands, are the decisive element that is beginning to subvert the feminine categorization of the domestic sphere, at the same time weakening traditional masculinity and moulding new schemes in *haredi* gender and family relationships. It is undeniable that this evolution requires a big adaptation of the society of learners model to a new configuration of *haredi* family where an educated and working woman runs the family, together with her husband. Here the keyword is 'together', and it points at a change in the conception young *haredi* couples have of their lives and of the family they are going to form. One of the women I interviewed explained:

It's changing, it's challenging, it's a new thing. It's completely a new world. It's like confronting a new world, materialism, enjoying your marriage in a way that before was not even thought of. Before, marriage was like a factory: getting married, having children to continue the dynasty. It was not about you having a good time. Yes, you are having a good time, but this is not it. This is not what is meant for, marriage. I think all over the world, is considered like something that it's needed to be done. You are not exactly expected to become best friends, yes you do have fun, yes you do have to enjoy sex, but this is not what it is for, you know? I think that the best illustration for it [this new conception of marriage] is that women never took their husband to the child birth, they always took their mother, their sisters. It's like two separate spheres. It was like my relationships, my love, my connections are with my sisters, my mother, my friends [...] and I am married with my husband because this is what we do [...] Now it's kind of normal to be with your husband when you give birth, because this is *our* thing, *we* bring together children, *we* raise them together, *we* have a relationship with each other, and girls are looking at marriage in a different way. It's not just about having children, it's about having a *friend*. (Foscarini 2014)

Another one said:

No no here it's very common [fathers being involved in family life]. I think in the *haredi* community even more. Because women are working, so the father is the one who sends kids to school, the one who picks them up, the one warming the meals, if not cooking the meals, my husband is the one cooking the meals (laughs). They are very involved. (Foscarini 2014)

From the statements of the women interviewed, it is clear that a big change is undergoing within the *haredi* community in Israel. Women play a role of active agents and actors in the definition of their role and image. And it

is precisely the education they received that permitted them to overlook social and religious constraints and to build for themselves a new space for action. Because, even though they accept a priori the subordinated role the dominant social ideology assigns them, they question it continuously with their every day experiences, «carrying out social activities that overstep the declared ideology and infusing them with themes and behaviors that stem from their existence» (El-Or 2005, p. 134). In fact, in spite of the huge burden imposed on *haredi* women, both material and ideological, they increasingly participate in the public life, by getting an education and supporting the society of learners, while trying to change it with their daily deeds.

4 Conclusions

From the establishment of the State of Israel onwards, the *haredi* community has rebuilt and rehabilitated itself not only on a spiritual level, but also on a more concrete plane, reconstructing its material culture and developing into what is effectively a Western technological consumer society (Tikochinski et al. 2010, p. 39). Changes may be noticed in many spheres of *haredi* life that are going to draw the *haredi* community closer to the secular Israeli society around it. The contemporary *haredi* society in Israel is thus adopting a pragmatic approach towards modernity and, according to some scholars, the most modern sectors of *haredi* society are already undergoing an increasing process of «Israelianization», internalizing values and behavioral patterns of the Israeli culture (Tikochinski et al. 2010, p. 39). Among the transformations leading the *haredi* community towards modernity, the most important and influential is the evolution of the educational system, which is linked to the change in the status of women and to the renegotiation of gender and family roles. Focusing on secular education and vocational training, it may be asked how the developments described in this paper have a chance to turn into something more permanent and significant in the future. According to Yacob Lupu: «there has indeed been a radical change in this sector [secular education] in everything that pertains to external studies and higher education» however, «the process of change will be a long, drawn-out affair. Shortcuts will not work» (2005, p. 120).

With regard to women's education and social position, some great changes are occurring within the *haredi* community. Even though the pronounced ideology of the community speaks of conservatism and growing segregation, the findings presented in this study show that women, by accepting the socio-cultural framework they are born in - which identifies them as subordinated - are using their education and literacy to change the environment surrounding them. Thanks to the education offered, they

are actively participating to the construction of their social position and cultural reality. *Haredi* women present themselves as stronger, more cooperative and proactive women, indispensable for the functioning of the *haredi* social system.

Women are slowly making a shift from a traditional set of values more tied to 'the inner world' of the community, to a more secular set of values, rather linked to 'the outer, secular world', giving more importance to the individual, rather than to the communal (Foscarini 2014). The change in the educational and working sphere, has led necessarily to a change in the domestic sphere, causing a re-adaptation of gender roles within the *haredi* family. *Haredi* women, even if in a implicit way, respectful of the gender roles assigned by *haredi* communal norms, are putting more pressure on their husbands, demanding from them greater domestic involvement. By asking their husbands to take away time from their study activity they are questioning, even if in the most indirect way, their masculinity and their role within family and society. Of course, this pattern is not valid for all women, and a great number, if not the majority of them, is still employed within the community, or not employed at all, their families depending completely on State support and charity. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this substantial evolution in the relationships between men and women within the community, is the sign that some substantial change is taking place.

In conclusion, the elements outlined above speak of a deep transformation the *haredi* community is undergoing. A small group of people, changing the traditional *haredi* ways, is the pioneer of a widespread social change the *haredi* community will see in the future. What remains to be seen is how the majority of the community and its most traditional sectors will counter this modernization process, and how the Israeli Government will adjust its policies and attitudes toward an *haredi* community more and more present within the Israeli society.

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