

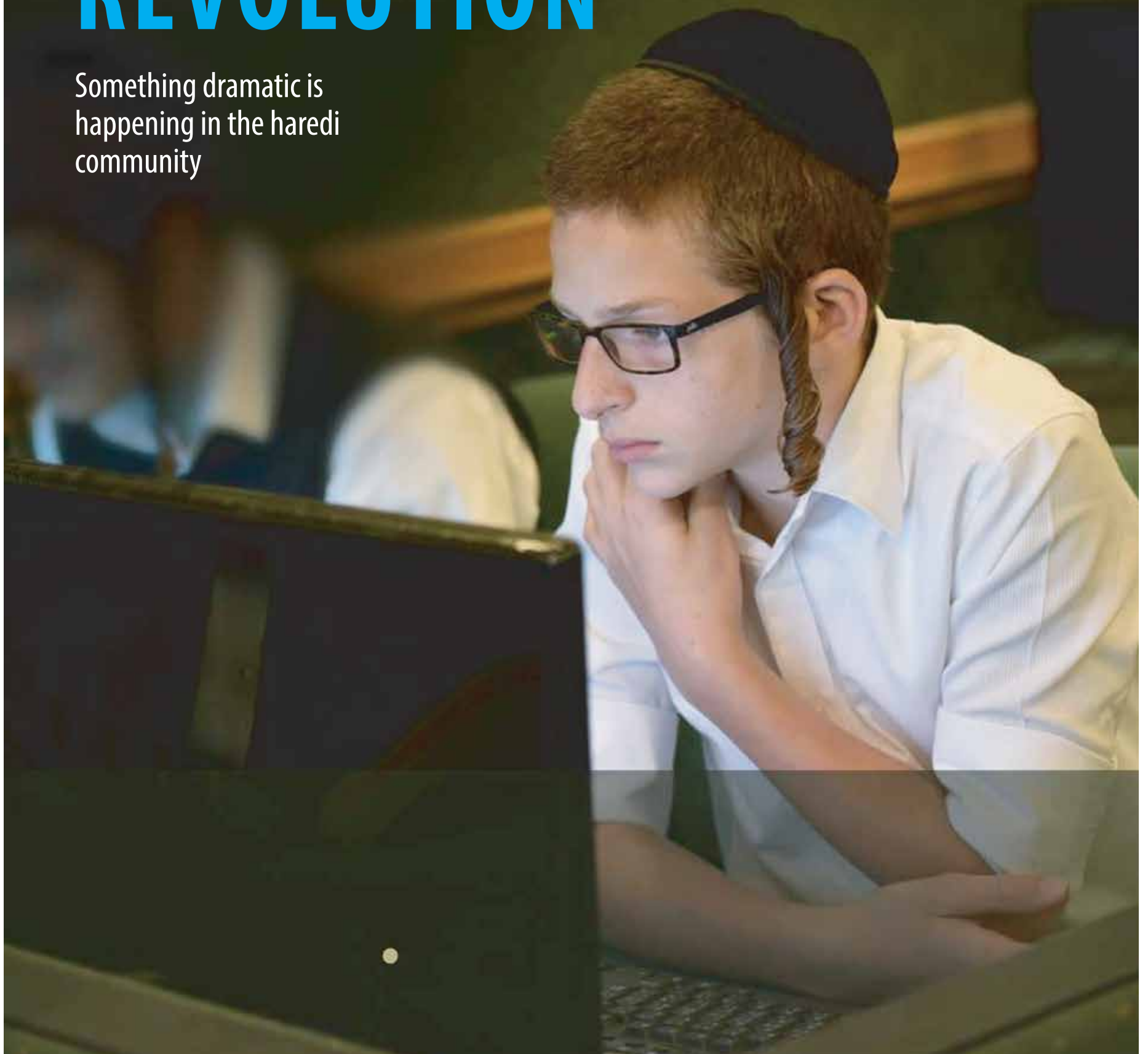
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MAGAZINE

THE QUIET HAREDI REVOLUTION

Something dramatic is
happening in the haredi
community



THE HAREDI COMMUNITY STEPS OUT



LEADING THE WAY: From left, Rabbi Karmi Gross, Dov Lipman, Avigdor Rabinovich and Chavie Ehrenfeld. (Photos: Courtesy)

• RIVKAH LAMBERT ADLER

The only contact most Israelis have with the haredi community is through the frequent protests and demonstrations against the draft by certain sects that disrupt daily routine and put them in a negative light. But while that's what is seen in public, behind the scenes something dramatic has started happening in the haredi community in Israel. Leaders are stepping up from within the community itself and establishing programs to more fully integrate haredim into society.

Community activist and former MK Dov Lipman told *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, "The first step toward integration into society while remaining haredi is education."

Rabbi Menachem Bombach, a Viznitzer Hassid from the Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea She'arim, opened a network of yeshiva high schools for haredi boys and girls, enabling them to combine intensive religious studies with general studies.

Lipman noted that Bombach's efforts, which are targeted to eventually enroll 10,000 students per year throughout Israel, are "a development that will lead to a massive transformation as it becomes the norm for haredi children to learn general studies through high school."

Mentioning a video from this past April in which Bombach is seen talking to his students about Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day, Lipman commented that the video, which he edited and uploaded to YouTube, had over a million views. "It went viral because it showed how the haredi community is changing and beginning to embrace being part of Israel.

"His students are fervently religious and studying Torah on a high level but also have music clubs, engage in farming activities, learn about their country, and will be prepared for higher education and earning academic degrees."

Haredi wife and mother Chavie Ehrenfeld takes education for haredi women to the next level, enabling them to earn undergraduate degrees in culturally sensitive classrooms in Israeli universities. Some 3,000 haredi women have been educated through the program established nine years ago, which offers separate classes for women and evening class schedules to accommodate mothers of young children. An incredible 99% of the

women enrolled have earned a degree.

Ehrenfeld elaborated on the issues that are specific to haredi women attending Israeli colleges and universities.

"They need separate classes and prefer classes together with other haredi women. They prefer female teachers. This is not always [possible] and some do have male teachers. They don't want teachers to bring examples in class that they cannot relate to and are not familiar with, such as television, which they don't have.

"They also don't want issues to be raised in class related to religious observance, such as a discussion about whether or not to observe Shabbat. A lot of work is done with the teachers to make sure they are sensitive to the needs of the students."

Since many young haredi women earn a teacher's certificate after high school, education is the most common undergraduate major. Graduate school remains a challenge; haredi women want to study a wide range of fields, but the State of Israel has not yet granted permission for this.

"This is really holding these women back," Ehrenfeld commented.

The women who pursue higher education are pioneers, often facing challenges from their families and communities, Ehrenfeld explained.

"Their families often do not support them and are against what they are doing. There are public announcements made against women who are studying for academic degrees and sometimes family members are expelled from their schools because someone in the family is going to college.

"Many work as teachers because that's the only skill they have. The haredi schools make them sign that they won't go to college to earn a degree, so many are stuck because they have to work – but if they work in these schools, they are not allowed to go to college. Some go to college secretly to deal with this problem.

"Some women do not have support from their husbands, which creates a real challenge in the home." At the same time, Ehrenfeld said, "Many husbands recognize how their wives earning a degree will help them financially and are supportive."

Speaking about how her program has impacted both haredi society and the larger Israeli society, Ehrenfeld reflected, "The haredi world teaches not to ask questions and just accept everything you are told. Going to school gives



CHAVIE EHRENFELD'S program takes education for haredi women to the next level, enabling them to earn undergraduate degrees in culturally sensitive university classrooms.



HAREDI YOUNGSTERS play soccer. Work and army are now increasingly viable options to complement studies.



'HAREDIM WEREN'T used to turning to the Internet and social media to find a job and had to learn how the system works.'

[the women] the courage to ask questions. It's actually a shock to them to see that there is an ability to question and research and they go through a process dealing with this.

"Seeing teachers who are not Haredi who are good, quality, caring, people is a shock to them." The reverse is also true, "as secular teachers discover how wonderful haredi women are in terms of their values, intelligence and abilities."

Ehrenfeld explained that the benefits accrue to the next generation.

"This leads to these women wanting their children to have general studies and higher education, and their children grow up with a mother who models being religious and educated. This doesn't impact only the family; the broader community sees how this woman is religious but also moving forward and being productive and earning a quality living – and this spreads."

According to Ehrenfeld, 25% of Israeli children in first grade are haredi. Their eventual "entrance into the workforce is critical for Israel and academic degrees mean entering the workforce at a higher level. This also means that they are paying taxes." Ehrenfeld concluded with the hope that more haredim in the general workforce will lead "to more tolerance and co-existence in Israel."

Ehrenfeld recently also established Link, a Beit Shemesh-based program for haredi and non-haredi women who aren't planning to earn an academic degree but do want to learn a profession.

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE education for haredim is but one of the challenges that leaders such as Bombach and Ehrenfeld are taking on.

Lipman said, "There is [also] the challenge of haredim who want to serve in the IDF while staying true to their upbringing and values. I was blessed to be the government official to help Rabbi Karmi Gross open the first-ever haredi hesder yeshiva, called Derech Chaim, which combines Torah study and army service."

Rabbi Gross explained, "We needed to address the needs of haredi boys who want to remain in an environment of serious Torah study, but at the same time do significant army service, contribute to their country and prepare for life after the army with the ability to support their families.

"There was no framework for this and boys had to choose one or the other. Our yeshiva and program gives them the ability to do both."

Derech Chaim's five-year program is recognized by the Israeli government and IDF. During the first three years, the students study Torah morning and afternoon, and are trained in computers in the evenings. In the final two years, they serve in the army all day and return to yeshiva at night. At the end of five years, participants will have completed army service and earned a bachelor's degree, while remaining in a yeshiva environment.

Lipman announced with pride, "The first 20 graduates of this yeshiva have just completed their army service and 100% of them found employment, earning 15,000 NIS to 20,000 NIS per month."

Gross reflected on the obstacles he faced establishing Derech Chaim. "First of all, it was new and never done before in the haredi community. That required getting boys to take a chance on something that had never been out there.

"Second, because of that, there was social pressure for the boys not to enroll because they didn't want to be outcasts or viewed as not successful, especially since the boys who study in our yeshiva are good students and strong learners.

"Third, I had to deal with all the naysayers telling me that it could not be done – that there was no way that strong learners would ever join a program with army service – and that it wouldn't work."

Derech Chaim is in its sixth year of operation. Approximately 50% of its funding is from private donations. Currently Derech Chaim has 70 young men enrolled in yeshiva and another 70 completing their army service through the program. Enrollment is primarily through word-of-mouth in the haredi community.

"We have had shockingly little vocal opposition. We expected more, especially now that we are well known and have full capacity, with very strong Torah learners and serious boys. I think our approach of doing minimal advertising in the haredi media has protected us from vocal opposition. Perhaps I can be hopeful and believe that the haredi leadership sees value in what we are doing," Gross reflected.

As for the future, "We want to keep growing. We need to move to a larger campus to be able to take in more boys and are working toward that goal. We want to ex-

pand the degree and army part of the program beyond computer sciences so that non-technology-oriented boys will have meaningful army service and can earn degrees in other fields.

"The ultimate goal is to build a campus surrounded by a community of our graduates and their families so our students can see this Torah way of life modeled for them on a daily basis. Ten years from now, we hope for it to be completely acceptable for haredi boys to earn a degree and serve in the army – not as a *b'dieved*, meaning that it is not ideal. This approach should become an alternative ideal and I feel like we are on our way to making this happen," he concluded.

EDUCATION AND army service are important keys to unlocking the door to full employment, Lipman commented.

"The final stage of this revolution is employment. Haredim had a difficult time finding employment because of their unfamiliarity with broader Israeli society and also their fears about diving into this world, which was unknown to them. There is also an issue of them applying for jobs and employers not wanting to hire haredim.

"To deal with this challenge, I partnered with a young haredi man named Avigdor Rabinovich to create the Leon Jolson Parnasa Project, a haredi-run employment service that reaches out to haredim and connects them to employers searching for employees. [Employers] contact us in their search specifically for haredim to join their companies."

Rabinovich elaborated, "High percentages of haredim want to work, but they don't have connections to find jobs and don't know where to go to search for them. In addition, many employers don't want to hire haredim. We serve as a bridge between the two worlds and create a platform that opens employment opportunities to haredim."

Established four years ago, the first challenge was financial.

"We started from scratch with no funds, so we had to raise money. Thank God, then-MK Dov Lipman was head of the Knesset task force to help haredim enter the workforce."

The project was named in memory of donor Barbara Blumenthal's father Leon Jolson. Decades ago,

Jolson recognized the problem of haredim not being able to support their families. He believed that it was vital for Israel to solve this problem.

"The second challenge was social," Rabinovich explained. "Haredim weren't used to turning to the Internet and social media to find a job and had to learn how the system works. In addition, they had a fear of not being accepted into secular workplaces and had to be shown that this wasn't the case.

"Finally, there was the fear of rabbis coming out against the organization. When we started, haredim working was not as accepted as it is now."

Rabinovich also mentioned that there was a need to help employers feel more comfortable hiring haredim.

"We explain to [prospective employers] what they get when they hire haredim – dedicated and talented employees who are often more motivated than those who come from broader society because they feel like they have something to prove. We also reassure them that haredi workers won't require them to change their work environment [beyond] adding a kosher microwave and providing them with time to pray.

"It's also a patriotic act, because it helps all of Israel to hire haredim and enable them to support their families. What's amazing is that once they hire just one haredi, they see that it's good for their company and they want to hire more."

The numbers speak for themselves. To date, the Leon Jolson Parnasa Project has helped more than 20,000 haredim find work. Rabinovich estimates that the gender split is about 50/50. They have 30,000 clients and 10,000 employers in their system.

Success has led to a squelching of opposition.

"People seeing that their friends and neighbors are no longer poor and that they stay religious despite working. That says it all," Rabinovich commented.

"In just a few years, we have changed the culture. Haredim going to work is not only not forbidden, it is now accepted. A reality has been created on the ground regarding haredim going to work as a norm.

"I want to make a call, especially to American Jews, to see what we are doing and help. They can prevent people from living in poverty and surviving on charity," he concluded.

LIPMAN HAS been a major advocate advancing this revolution, which he calls the "Haredi Spring" from behind the scenes. "When I entered the Knesset, the integration of haredim into Israeli society was one of my primary areas of focus. Both Avigdor and Rabbi Gross came to meet with me about their projects."

He speaks passionately about the shifts going on in the haredi world. "There is nothing short of a quiet revolution taking place. There are more haredim learning general studies, serving in the army, in higher education and working than ever before. My ultimate dream is to see an Israel filled with haredi doctors, attorneys, accountants, hi-tech entrepreneurs and even generals.

"Aside from helping people support their families with dignity, unity is created in Israel. Broader Israel is more capable of embracing haredim when they see them serving and working, and the workplace creates a platform for haredim and secular Israelis to interface with one another and each learns to respect the other.

"I believe with passion in the integration of haredim into Israeli society, but only if this is done with sensitivity to their backgrounds and spiritual needs. One cannot demand that haredim study, serve, and work in environments that they are not comfortable with. There must be a willingness to meet them on their terms and adapt to what they need. Chavi Ehrenfeld's program is a perfect example of the tremendous success that comes when broader Israel demonstrates this sensitivity, understanding and flexibility.

"There is one additional point. Many are concerned about the relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israel and fear Israel becoming more extreme religiously.

"The opposite is happening. As haredim go to work, they become more moderate in their perspective toward non-haredi Jews. They reject the old guard's political views, which is why haredi political power is not rising with the growth of its population. So, aside from all these efforts helping haredim support their families with dignity and creating unity in Israel, they will also positively impact the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel," he concluded. ■



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