

Israel's "Natural" Coalition Partners, and their Education

by
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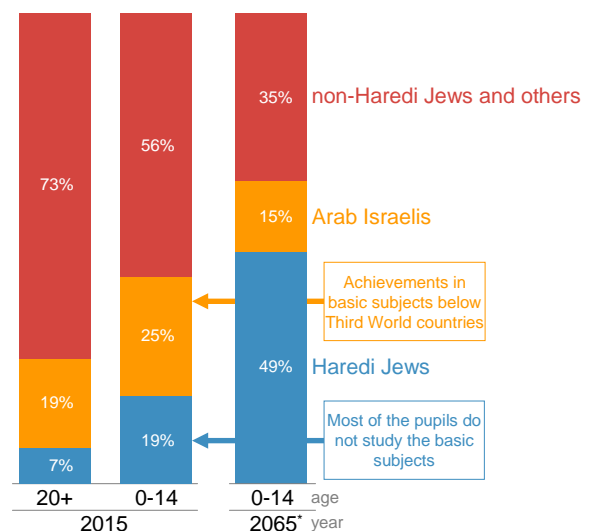
A question for those Israelis who plan to vote this coming April: When the Left and the Right state that they refuse to sit together in a government, who are the "natural" partners that they will prefer, and what will be the price of their choice? From June 1977 through April 2019, the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) political parties have been a part – in one constellation or another – of every Israeli government except two (roughly 39 of the 42 years). The short-term price is low: quiet on the peace/territories front. The long-term price is terminal, for them and for us, if we don't get our act together while it is still possible to do so.

Israel is the only developed country in the world that allows parents to deprive their children of the basic right to a core curriculum. Nearly all Haredi boys do not study the core curriculum after eighth grade, and what they do study until eighth grade is minimal, at best (no science, no English and mathematics at very rudimentary levels). While this was once sufficient in the less-developed Israel, with over 80 percent of the Haredi men employed in the 1970s, the demand for such individuals in a modern economy has been nearly identical to the demand for completely uneducated men. As a result, the employment rates of both groups have dropped like a rock over the decades, temporarily rising in recent years as a result of major cuts in welfare benefits.

Israel is a country enamored of short cuts and cutting corners – a trait that our politicians have brought to an art form. The Haredim have cultivated a conventional wisdom that they have phenomenal study habits which can help them overcome all deficiencies very quickly. The response of the non-Haredi politicians has been the easy route: no need for them to study what they need as children, let's give them the type of colleges that they insist on as adults, regardless of their quality. An increase in the number of Haredi students from 4,000 in 2009 to almost 10,000 today would seemingly appear to corroborate this line of reasoning.

But if you don't study much, you don't know much. The extraordinary dropout rates of the Haredim from academia are unparalleled in Israel. Since 2004, there has been no change in the very low share of prime working age Haredi men with an academic degree (there has been a very slight increase among Haredi women over the past three years). The percentage of Haredim with an academic degree in the United States – where they are not allowed to circumvent the core curriculum – is twice the percentage in Israel. It is possible to be a Haredi rabbi and to study at a serious university (there is no less an example than the Lubavitcher Rebbe).

Israel's changing demographics
each religious sector as share of total



* midpoint projection

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

Fertility rates among Haredim, which fell after the massive cuts in welfare assistance at the beginning of the 2000s, have been steadily rising over the past decade and have eclipsed the seven-children-per-woman mark. The quickness of the demographic changes that Israel is undergoing is captured in the graph. Today, 7 percent of the adults and 19 percent of the children are Haredim. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, in two generations, about half of Israel's children will be Haredim. If our politicians find it difficult to create a government without them today, does anyone think that it will become easier to change direction in the future?

When 20 percent of the population paid 92 percent of all income tax revenues in 2017 (an increase from the 83 percent that they accounted for in 2000), it would be a good idea if each voter asks his representatives the following: If the Haredim do not receive a first world education immediately, who will carry this country on their shoulders when the Haredim grow up – and what do you plan to do about this after the April election?