

## **The World of the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Community in the COVID-19 Era**

Ada Taggar Cohen  
Graduate School of Theology, Doshisha University

This paper is part of a project on religious reactions to the COVID-19 global pandemic. It surveys the major responses of Jewish Ultra-Orthodox communities during the past year, with an attempt to understand the reasons behind the fact that these communities had such high rates of infection, as well as so many deaths, while refusing to abide by state-imposed restrictions. The aim is to assess the situation through understanding the background of the Ultra-Orthodox community's history and the principle issues emerging from the restrictions imposed on their daily religious life. The main points to be observed are:

- Who are the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox, where did they start historically and what was their place among Jewish communities in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries? How large is their percentage in Jewish communities in the world? Their community in Israel today.
- Ultra-Orthodoxy as an answer to modernism
- Ultra-Orthodoxy and the Holocaust.
- Understanding their community as an autonomous world, while rejecting state authority on their lives.
- Clashes between state-authority (police) and the Ultra-Orthodox.

It is now the beginning of February 2021 and the Jews of Ultra-Orthodox communities are in the headlines in connection with the Corona virus spread, mainly in the State of Israel as well as in New York and London. These Jewish communities refuse to abide by the legal restrictions imposed on them by their governments concerning care to be taken to stop the spread of the virus.

It is in a sense shocking to see how these communities suffer due to their reaction to the pandemic – or more accurately their inappropriate non-reaction to the dire situation

caused by it – by not keeping distances, refusing to refrain from gathering in large numbers, and then refusing vaccination.

This essay will firstly give a short introduction to the origin of communal life in Jewish Orthodoxy, and explain Orthodox Jew's main beliefs which are not compatible with the fight against the virus spread. It will try to place these beliefs not only in the religious context, but also within the context of autonomous communities in a democratic society.

## **1. The Background for the Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy in Jewish History**

It is important to understand the background of the emergence of Orthodoxy in Judaism as a reaction to modernization in the European continent. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was politically still a combination of monarchies which were slowly becoming democracies. The process gave people freedom of movement, and specifically for Jews who for hundreds of years had been living in closed communities, there was an opening for them to become involved in the culture of the general population especially regarding the acquisition of knowledge and familiarization with literature that would otherwise have been outside the Jewish teaching canon and curricular. Most of these Jewish communities lived in Eastern Europe until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the development of industrialization and urbanization in this region had a strong impact on Jewish communities living there.<sup>1</sup> However, some Jewish communities' reaction to these changes were to close up around their beliefs and practices, while denying its young generation access to current new teaching. The basic autonomy that was held by the Jewish communities and their control over people's lives was gradually lost due to children studying in state schools; their reaction to this was to gather them back to the community's schools in order to maintain the community's way of life. A key term coined by a Slovenian/Hungarian Rabbi from Bratislava was: "New is prohibited from the Torah", that is to say, renewing things that are against the commandments of Jewish Law was prohibited, meaning that Jewish traditions followed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century go back to ancient times.

While Jews in Western Europe moved towards integrating into the general society, of around some five million Jews in Eastern Europe, only a very small proportion of their children went to the state schools. Studying science was not allowed in the Jewish Schools,

and those who studied them, did so individually. The emergence of Zionism towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was perceived as a great threat to these religious communities and was strongly opposed by them. As a result, most of these large Jewish communities of Eastern Europe remained there and did not immigrate to Palestine after the First World War. During the Nazi German conquest of the region most of these Jewish communities were exterminated in the concentration camps, the horrific devastation of European Judaism. The remnants of the Jewish Holocaust escaped to Palestine and established new communities there, as well as the one in New York. These closed communities controlled by their Rabbis tried to avoid getting involved in state politics.

After the Second World War renewal of these communities was the most important activity undertaken by their leaders both in Israel and the USA. Some were also revived in England, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Apart from Israel none of these communities were involved in political institutions. The countries where they now lived offered conditions for their recovery, and the communities flourished.

## **2. The Most Important Religious Activities for the Ultra-Orthodox and their Problematic Implementation During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Seeing themselves as remnants of the great Jewish communities destroyed and exterminated during the Holocaust, marriage and having a large number of children was conceived as the most important act. Marriage ceremonies are events which include a large number of people and a lot of food is consumed. At the other end of life, funerals are also considered a must to be attended. Both events are regarded as the fulfillment of religious commandments, and are interpreted through religious laws.

In everyday life an orthodox Jew must attend prayers morning, noon and evening, in the synagogue, an environment where a large number of men, the minimum being ten, are needed to conduct the three daily prayers. Living in small communities, the orthodox Jews were able to lead this kind of life around a synagogue which also served as a house of permanent learners - a group of elite students studying the Jewish scriptures thus enabling them to interpret these scriptures in answer to present-day questions concerning the life of the community.

In regard to modern technology, the use of modern machines was allowed and even supported by the religious leaders, but when it came to the use of technology that could influence ideas and enable contact with the world outside of the community – such as

television, and certainly internet connections on mobile phones – this has been prohibited. The only way of communication in the orthodox world is by physical boards on the streets, where notices are placed daily, or community’s newspapers. Another way is a restricted phone that does not have access to the internet. This created a closed community cut off from the general population. Even more so, the orthodox community is excluded from the general population because it speaks Yiddish (an older dialect of German), and since the children do not attend state schools, they do not know the language of the country in which they live, in many cases (that would be Modern Hebrew in Israel and English in the USA). Each community has leaders that connect with the state authorities but the ordinary people are not supposed to be in contact with life outside of their community. They have their own stores, their own markets, and their own companies approved by their leaders for the production of food, clothing and other household necessities. It is a community that sustains itself to a certain degree.

Orthodox communities around the world are growing fast, especially due to their high fertility rate in the OECD countries. They marry young and have large families, thus forming a society with a high percentage of young people. As such in Israel the Ultra-Orthodox make up 12% of the population (more than 1,110,000 people in 2019). More than half of this population is between the ages of 0-19.

In general, the Orthodox community is a poor community, due to its inability to become part of the workforce for lack of education. The issue of daily study concerns the Jewish scriptures, and does not include other general studies. This lack of education creates total dependency on the leaders, who themselves are not educated outside of the Jewish traditional scriptures. In Israel – a welfare state – the Ultra-Orthodox community relies on the support of the state, which supports a family according to the number of children. The families are thus large and live in very crowded homes. At the same time, they also rely on their community for support.

### **3. Reactions of the Ultra-Orthodox Communities to COVID-19, Especially in Israel<sup>2</sup>**

The first news items in the newspapers once the virus started to spread were that the Ultra-Orthodox conducted marriage ceremonies with a large number of participants. Around this time, newspapers also drew attention to the huge crowds which followed the funeral of a Rabbi who died of COVID-19. In October during the Jewish high holidays in New York,

the number of infected and sick people spiked due to the large gatherings in synagogues and family celebrations.<sup>3</sup> In Israel, the majority of cities with a high number of infected people – designated as “red” cities – were cities with large (or only) Ultra-Orthodox communities. (At the top of the lists were Beitar Elit, Mody’in-Elit, Bet-Shemesh, Benei-Berak, all cities with almost exclusively Ultra-Orthodox populations). These communities strongly voiced their refusal to abide by the restrictions of the Israeli government. All Israel has been under lockdown, no opening of schools or businesses was allowed, but the Ultra-Orthodox continued life as usual.<sup>4</sup> One of their most egregious acts was to continue keeping their schools open despite lockdown orders. It is understandable that leaving children at home doing nothing could cause them to look for activities elsewhere that might deviate from the strict life style of Jewish orthodoxy. They were unable to stop worshipping through prayers. They refused to close schools in accordance with their main belief that study is an inherent religious duty for all male Jews; and thus they maintained classes, with kids mostly wearing masks, while adults continued studying in their own institutions called *Yeshivah*.

To conclude this short survey, some of the most crucial events in Israel as well as in New York City were (and still are in Israel) the violent clashes between Ultra-Orthodox males and the police trying to enforce restrictions. The Ultra-Orthodox have always reacted to the police with suspicion, they have no trust in the good will of police officers, and feel that their lives in the closed community are being interfered with. After several members of the police force were injured, the police in Israel decided not to enforce the restrictions on Ultra-Orthodox communities – especially in Jerusalem and Benei-Berak, two cities with large Ultra-Orthodox populations.<sup>5</sup>

This gives rise to an important question on the way in which a democracy – in this case Israel – allows a certain percentage of its population to disobey the laws the State imposes on its own citizens. Looking especially at Israel - how can a religious group be autonomous, and thus extract itself from society, while at the same time use the resources of the country and take part in governmental authoritative forums – as the coalition?

#### **4. Concluding Observations**

Francis Fukuyama in his recent volume titled *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, has indicated in this regard “that a National identity begins with a shared belief in the legitimacy of the country’s political system, whether that system is

democratic or not. Identity can be embodied in formal laws and institutions that dictate, for example, what the education system will teach children about their country's past. [...] It consists of the stories that people tell about themselves: where they came from, what they celebrate, their shared historical memories, what it takes to become a genuine member of the community.”<sup>6</sup> This definition is crucial when looking at what was revealed during the pandemic, i.e. the refusal of a large part of the population to identify itself with the country's laws, not identifying itself with State values, having its separate system of education as well as a system of communication and obedience which created the spread of the pandemic and the inability of the medical system to respond to the pandemic spread. The values and beliefs that stand in principle for these communities, created a situation where these people say, “if God decided that I get sick and that I die, so be it”.<sup>7</sup> The fact that authority derives from God through the rabbis, and not from scientific medical authoritative institutions poses a great problem when confronting the spread of the pandemic in these communities.

\* The project hosted a lecture of Dr. Joyce Dalsheim, Associate Professor of Global Studies at the Department of Global Studies of the University of North Carolina Charlotte, USA held on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Dr. Dalsheim's lecture on the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community is placed online. Its title: “Memory, Meaning, and Pandemic in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Communities: What is Essential?”

Lecture's abstract: “During times of crisis, marginalized communities often suffer more than others. In Israel and elsewhere, Jewish Ultra-Orthodox communities not only have high rates of COVID-19 infection, but are criticized for not following public health protocols and are blamed for being hazards to the health of the public at large. This talk examines some of the cultural frameworks of mutual suspicion that inform the relationships between majority cultures and the ultra-Orthodox. In order to understand these tensions, we need to think about collective memory and ask about what it is that cultural groups consider essential.” Her last volume *Israel Has a Jewish Problem: Sovereignty, Secularism, and Self-Elimination*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of these changes see Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). Material on the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel especially in 2019 comes from *The Yearbook of Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel*, Assembled by Lee Cahaner and Gilad Malach; Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute

- 
- (RA), 2019. (downloaded from <https://www.idi.org.il/media/13727/the-yearbook-of-ultra-orthodox-society-in-israel-2019.pdf> 2021/1/10). [Hebrew].
- <sup>2</sup> On March 26, 2020 the *Israeli Institute for Democracy* published an overview of the way in which the reaction of the Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel can be understood. I will refer to some of these reactions later on. (Downloaded from [http://fs.knesset.gov.il/23/Committees/23\\_cs\\_bg\\_570661.pdf](http://fs.knesset.gov.il/23/Committees/23_cs_bg_570661.pdf) 2021/1/10). [Hebrew].
- <sup>3</sup> “According to authorities, the most significant jumps involve neighborhoods of Brooklyn where Orthodox Jewish populations are substantial, and coincided with gatherings linked to the recent holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-virus-rebounds-in-new-york-ultra-orthodox-decry-stigmatization/> 2021/2/10)
- <sup>4</sup> Politically the government is under pressure from the Ultra-Orthodox parties, because it cannot have a coalition without the Ultra-Orthodox parties. Although these people do not support the Zionist case, since they live in a state declared a Jewish state, they have a history of joining the government, not caring whether it is left or a right wing-nationalist, for their own benefit. On the way Ultra-Orthodox vote in Israel see *The Yearbook of Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel*, *ibid.* pp 74-80. As of the support of NY Ultra-Orthodox for Trump in last November’s elections (2020) see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0\\_t5k3jzxs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0_t5k3jzxs) (read 2021/1/10). <https://www.au.org/church-state/november-2020-church-state-magazine/people-events/hasidic-groups-resist-governors> (read 2021/2/10).
- <sup>5</sup> According to a survey conducted in 2016, above 40% of Ultra-Orthodox do not see themselves as part of the state of Israel, neither do they trust the police force. Basically, they see the police as negative forces acting against their culture and religious beliefs, since the police represent the secular State of the Zionists. For other people in Israel, the fact that this community not only receives large sums of money from the government, but also increases the burden on the medical institutions, creates further resentment.
- <sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 126 (with footnote 2).
- <sup>7</sup> Israel in this regard may face a breakdown of its democracy as the percentage of its Ultra-Orthodox populations is going to increase to about 30% by the middle of the century, and having a population that has nothing to do with the State’s general community identity will probably pose problems

**Several articles appearing in newspapers on the Ultra-Orthodox  
(out of the many that appeared during the year, accessed last 2021/1/31)**

From the Australian Journal *The Conversation* article by Joyce Dalsheim “Jewish History Explains why Some Ultra-Orthodox Communities defy Coronavirus restrictions” April 27, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/jewish-history-explains-why-some-ultra-orthodox-communities-defy-coronavirus-restrictions-135292>

From the *New York Post*, by Lee Brown, “London’s Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community has one of the world’s highest COVID Rates” Feb. 3, 2021 <https://nypost.com/2021/02/03/londons-ultra-orthodox-jewish-community-records-staggering-covid-rates/>

Many articles appeared In Israeli newspapers complaining about the way Ultra-orthodox communities in Israeli cities reacted to the restrictions with violence:

<https://www.maariv.co.il/corona/corona-israel/Article-816571> (2021/1/21)