A Multicultural Approach to Adult Learning: The Critical Path towards Integrating the Ultra-orthodox Population in Employment

Rina Cohen Sutzkever

Introduction

Integrating adult citizens into the workforce has become a central issue on the economic and social agenda in Israel in recent years, as in the rest of the world, for two reasons:

• It is widely understood that employment and work rescue families from the cycle of poverty.
• There is a desire and need to compete in the global labor market, and therefore, to meet the standards of developed countries in terms of the percentage of employed adults.

Public discourse in Israel identifies two populations which are not integrated in the labor market as expected: the ultra-orthodox (haredi) population – with an emphasis on the men, and the Arab population – with emphasis on Arab women. The strategies for contending with these two populations are as fundamentally distinctive as the cultural-social

Rena Cohen has undergraduate degrees in sociology and psychology and an M.Ed in education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For the past three decades she has been the developer and director of the field of family and parents in the Ministry of Education. She is a college lecturer in the area of parenting, family and parent-teacher learning.
differences between them. This article is concerned with the issue of integrating men from the haredi population into the labor market. The issue of Arab women requires comprehensive, in-depth treatment, and a separate article should be dedicated to it.

This article focuses primarily on the main issue germane to integrating haredi populations in employment, i.e., the strategic question – how?

The Background Underlying the Issue – The Model of Zebulun And Issachar

The issue under discussion is rooted in ancient Jewish culture, in thousands of years of Jewish history, as well as in the new history of Israel and its emerging society.

The haredi population has built itself, with the state's support, into a society of scholars. The paradigm for the model of the "learning society" and its relationship with the general society is what is called "The Zebulun and Issachar model". The earliest sources to describe the Zebulun-Issachar relationship are in commentaries and homiletics that derived from Jacob's and Moses' blessings of the tribes of Israel. Jacob's blessing says, "Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore and he shall be a haven for ships... Issachar is as a strong-boned ass, crouching down between the sheepfolds... He bent his shoulder to the burden" (Gen. 49:13–14). Moses' blessing says, "Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, and Issachar, in your tents" (Deut. 33:18).

This model is described marvelously in S. Y. Agnon's story, "Issachar and Zebulun":

When Issachar came to receive his portion of the Garden of Eden, his book was examined and written in it was, 'Issachar studied the Torah
for two days.' Issachar was astounded. He said: ‘How is it possible that I, who all my life did not leave the tent of the Torah, and shouldered the burden of study, have only two days of Torah?’ They said to him: 'Issachar, in the world you came from, how did you earn a living?' He said to them: 'I had a brother named Zebulun, and he made me his partner. He dwelled by the seashore, sailed in ships, earned money from commerce and fed me, and I sat and studied Torah. They said to him: 'If so, your Torah belongs to Zebulun, for if Zebulun had not dealt in commerce you would not have studied Torah, and you have already had your reward in your lifetime…

(S. Y. Agnon, 1959, p. 35)

For generations the Zebulun-Issachar model operated, to varying extents, in Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora. More recently, it appears that this model has lost its validity; large segments of the general public disagree with it and raise questions about equality, social justice and mutual responsibility as they are understood in the spirit of the times and the general culture. Moreover, in our era, which is colloquially called the “Age of Knowledge,” the culture of lifelong learning has intensified. A UNESCO report on the subject entitled “Learning: The Treasure Within” emphasizes that lifelong learning is, on the one hand, a key to life, and on the other hand, the right of every individual in a democratic society (UNESCO report, 1996), and that the changes and developments [in adult learning] require continual updating. Therefore, many opportunities for learning are offered to adults and study frameworks suited to their needs, interests and abilities exist. Indeed, many adults are in the process of studying for a variety of different reasons and for different purposes; there are those who seek to acquire an academic degree, a profession or a second career, with social activists and even volunteers studying alongside those working for their livelihoods. Learning, in different formats and to different extents,
is part of the lifestyles and routines of many mature adults. In terms of adult learning, haredi society no longer has a monopoly, but it has remained committed to a way of life of learning throughout the entire day, which derives from the haredi interpretation of the verse, "You shall study it day and night" (Josh. 1:8), i.e., the precept to study the Torah fulltime, which does not leave time for any other occupation.

In view of these changes, there are calls demanding for a re-examination of the relative participation of the differing segments of society in bearing the brunt of societal burdens, contributing to reducing social distress and increasing social wellbeing and growth competition for the whole of society. A significant part of these demands are directed towards the haredi sector, which conducts a markedly different lifestyle from that of the wider population. This is expressed by investing most of its time and energy in Torah study and holding this as the religious and social ideal, and consequently, there is no sharing of the economic burden and a trend towards isolationism and seclusion. Putting this ideal to practice also brings poverty and deprivation to the members of the haredi community, both adults and children, and this affects all of society.

However, there is a wide social consensus that the haredi population is an important, high quality part of Israeli society, and its contribution is essential to addressing fundamental societal issues and building a flourishing society. The main demand is for the haredi learning population to become integrated in the workforce. The aim of such integration is complex: To reduce poverty and dependence upon government stipends at the family level, and to increase productivity and the ability to compete at the national level.
Analyzing the issue of integration: premises and programs

In order to address the issue of integrating the haredi population in work, a number of bodies involved with influencing the design of national policy have undertaken to create position papers that include an in-depth analysis of the situation, indicate objectives and propose multidisciplinary plans of action.

The National Economics Council in the Prime Minister's Office released the frame of reference and fundamental premises upon which the different position papers were based (Jerusalem, 2009):

- The existence of a flourishing, independent haredi community is an essential to the Jewish character of Israel, and therefore, action should be taken to preserve and reinforce its foundations, and to avoid any move that may disturb these foundations.
- The poverty and growing dependency of the haredi community on stipends and donations weakens the community and affects its resilience, and therefore action should be taken to strengthen this community's independence and economic stability, primarily through encouraging employment.
- Encouraging employment within the haredi community is a major step in the effort to prevent the economic gaps from worsening and poverty in Israel from increasing.
- The haredi population is characterized by its well-honed learning skills, and its thorough and accountable attitude, all of which infuse it with great economic potential. Assistance in achieving integration in remunerative to realize this potential will contribute not only to the haredi population itself, but will also contribute significantly to the economic prosperity of the entire state of Israel.

To continue to address this issue on the basis of these fundamental premises, two significant elements must be defined and identified as they
relate to the following questions:

a. Who is a “haredi”? What is the delineating definition of this target population?

b. What are the obstacles to integrating haredim in the job market?

An answer to these two questions will constitute the basis for identifying and formulating the operational strategy needed to develop the relevant “how to.”

**Who is a haredi?**

Answering this question is not at all simple. We will begin by understanding the concept “haredi.” The primary meaning of [the word] haredi is one who is in awe of the word of God. The conventional definition of the concept “haredi” derives from a subjective perception of commitment to Jewish halakha [law] as this has been developed and expounded by rabbinic authorities in Jewish tradition. Identification of a population as haredi is based on an accretion of behaviors and adherence to a way of life defined as a “Torah way of life,” which includes specific kinds of educational institutions, places of residence, and community affiliations.

**Obstacles to integration in work**

The professional literature maintains that the factors affecting employment choices are derived from the individual's world-views, from the variety of available possibilities and from the relative feasibility of each possibility (*Integrating the Haredi Sector in Employment*, Levine, 2009). For the haredi population “obstacles related to world-views” have great, indeed critical, weight in decisions that its members make regarding this subject.

The distinguishing characteristics of the haredi population's world-view are:
a. Scrupulous observation of the religious precepts and traditions;
b. Apprehension regarding exposure to secular society and its worldview;
c. Reliance upon the opinions of Torah sages;
d. Attributing importance to "yeshiva student" status;
e. An aspiration to have a large number of children;
f. A frugal and modest way of life as a value and an ideal.

The emphasis placed upon religious observance and avoidance of exposure to secular society, together with the other aforementioned characteristics, create a complex and challenging obstacle to be contended with in order to integrate the haredi population into the work force.

To the above one must add obstacles intrinsic to the world of economics and employment:

• Low economic incentives to go out to work – a husband's employment in most haredi families will bring in only a relatively low income, and in turn is likely to cause the loss of various forms of government support and an increase in the family's expenses. Added to this is the difficulty in paying for training and acquisition of a profession.

• Lacks in human capital for employment – A haredi man usually lacks basic employment capital, particularly in his poor knowledge of English, mathematics, familiarity with computer use, as well as "soft skills" such as experience in looking for work, self-marketing, and the ability to pass the necessary employment aptitude tests.

• Avoidance of military service – A significant portion of haredi men study fulltime in yeshiva a status designated as 'Torato aumanuto': his Torah study is his profession], which precludes holding a permanent job unless one previously completed military service.

• The world of employment offers the haredi population limited job opportunities.
This unique combination of obstacles, which derives from both the population's characteristics and from the world of work, create an issue that is complex to deal with. The challenge of contending with this increases further in the face of the aspiration to protect the haredi community and cause no harm to its special features.

Coping mechanisms
Against this background, the big question is: What is the appropriate strategy for addressing the complex challenge of integrating the haredi population in employment?

To find the appropriate strategy we will look for the milestones by which it can be identified. Today's popular "positive psychology" is based upon research and professional expertise, which it uses to seek the strengths of the subject of inquiry, and use these qualities to cope with challenges and achieve the desired outcomes.

The powers and strengths of the members of the haredi community
The haredi community has unique characteristics. Outstanding among them are learning ability and a high level of study skills as well as a strong sense of community, which serves both as a source of support and control.

An external look at the community usually identifies these characteristics, but does not necessarily associate them with qualities of strength; indeed, at times it sees them as antithetical. Usually these characteristics, when measured by standards of modern Western culture, are perceived as anachronistic and not in pace with the modern dynamics of individualism and practical use of advanced, pioneering technologies. Therefore, these traits are perceived as reinforcing isolationism and obstructing integration.
The challenge is to recognize these characteristics and put their strengths to practical use as a means of promoting integration in employment in an open society while preserving, as stated, the distinctiveness of the haredi community.

The need to break down barriers, while remaining cognizant of the community's attributes and strengths, points to learning study as a critical means towards integration in work. The question is what type of learning can grapple with such a complex challenge. This article's recommendation is to examine the relevancy of adult learning to the matter at hand.

**Adult learning**

In an open and changing society in the age of the information revolution, continuous learning is perceived as necessary. It is essential for survival, to keep up-to-date with accumulated human knowledge, to develop functional, intellectual, emotional, ethical, communication, and social abilities, and to perform in new situations. Continuous learning is a central characteristic of adult learning.

Adult learning has unique models that distinguish between it and children's learning. At the base of all models are a number of principles (Tokatli, 2004):

a. The responsibility of the learners themselves to define the aim of their studies.

b. Reflection, i.e., thinking about the information learned and comparing it to existing knowledge.

c. Active engagement which enrich the experience, and utilizes it as a resource for learning.

d. Learning how to study according to personal learning styles.

e. Adaptation to the learner's needs, abilities, desires and way of life.
The In adult learning a significant factor is added to the above principles: relevance and a clear fulfillment of goals. Adult learners expect that their learning will be relevant to the context of their actual lives, to their aims and experience, and areas of interest with which they are involved. They expect that learning will assist them in assessing defined goals and meet their needs and wishes.

**Adult learning in the context of integration in employment**

Learning has always been a central route towards integration in work. Learning in a work context was generally focused in three frameworks that indicated the study aims and processes: training, ongoing professional development, and career change (Tokatli, 1999).

By *training* is meant the acquisition of a profession for a future job. Professional training prepares the individual for work and makes him qualified for the function he will fulfill. The main motive for joining a training program is the ambition to work in a useful, interesting and needed profession from which one can earn a living.

*Ongoing professional development* means adding, updating, expanding and enhancing studies, coping with complex problems, creating innovations and changes (Tokatli, 1998).

*Career change* refers to changing a job position specialization, or even a profession itself, which necessitates investing in new learning. In the age of changes, a change in specialization every few years has become a major characteristic of the world of employment, and one who is able to contend with career changes is regarded as having a high ability for renewed study.

It would appear that what is of initial relevance to our subject is primarily a training framework to acquire a profession and then, later on, it may be possible to make use of the other two frameworks. However,
to achieve integration in work more is needed. Because of cultural disparities and the lack of soft skills in the world of work, and out of the desire to maintain the distinctiveness of the haredi community, there is a need for a training model that concomitantly makes space for, and takes into consideration both its strengths and boundaries.

**The proposed model - the adult Learning Star**

Based upon the principles of adult learning and the strengths of the members of the haredi community, a model of action is proposed that places the haredi learner in the center and takes him into consideration.

The model is diagrammed in the shape of a star formed by two triangles. Specifically, three points of one triangle are labeled as the Needs, Abilities and Desires points, while those of the superimposed triangle represent the elements of proposed learning plan: Content, Method and Framework.

**The adult learning star**

![Diagram of the adult learning star](image_url)
The learning star draws attention to the elements of the learning module for haredi adult students whom the learning plan must address. The needs of the students, their abilities, and their desires arise from the characteristics of the haredi community. In brief, we will say that learning must take place while preserving their religious way of life and enabling the preservation of the haredi way of life. The task is to integrate learning in preparation for work within the haredi daily schedule, and not require it be changed. Accordingly, this learning needs to make intelligent use of the high learning skills of haredi students, and take their wants regarding learning methods and frameworks into account, as "...a person can only learn that which his heart desires" (Tractate Avoda Zara 19a). A sensitive attitude to the subject of community cohesion, i.e., learning typically takes place within a community framework, may even contribute to its presence and preclude students from dropping out during the course of study. Attention, consideration, and listening will help bring the haredi students closer to learning that will advance their integration in work. Study of this kind is also proof that additional activities can be incorporated into the haredi schedule – and this is one of the main objectives of integration into work.

One of the important roles of a system for adult learning is to provide support that encourages perseverance in studies based on the understanding that the student's achievements are first of all measured in relation to himself and his aims.

**Adult learning is based on the following principles:**

- **Trust** – Trust is the foundation of adult learning. It refers to the student's trust in himself and in his abilities to persevere in the learning process and succeed, and his trust that the instructor and the learning system seek his success and will enable him to achieve it. Trust is also required from the instructor – in his own ability as a
teacher who is capable of engendering edifying learning processes, and trust that the student yearns to learn and has the needed learning abilities to carry out the task. Learning that takes place according to the learning star model is learning that builds trust. The feeling of the student that he is in the center, and that his needs, abilities and wishes are important and given due consideration, builds trust in the teacher and the learning system (Seidman, 2007).

- **Providing opportunity** – Adult learning must offer opportunities for relevant study adapted to the adult learner. Providing a suitable opportunity produces successes and builds the student's trust in himself. The expertise of the field of lifelong learning and adult learning, which places the student in the center and focuses upon him, instills excitement and hope.

- **Support** – Adult learners need support during the learning process. Adults have a multitude of tasks and undertakings and are subject to the pressures of life. In order to persevere and overcome life's stresses and demands, it is vital that they are provided with support to reinforce their learning in the face of many delaying and hindering factors. A significant part of this support may come from the learning community itself. haredi students are used to community activity and they know how to provide and receive support out of a recognition of the value and power of a community.

These principles are of great import in promoting learning that enables integration in employment. From the outset, as a result of the cultural dissimilarity in lifestyle and the sense of being a closed, separate community, the underpinnings of trust between the haredi community and the rest of society are unstable. Building relationships of trust through adult learning will help in integration in employment and also in bringing the differing sectors of society closer.
**Adult learning at its best**

Learning in general, and adult learning in particular, is based on those who generate it – the educators. Adult learning as an indispensable means of integrating the haredi community in the workforce presents a great challenge within the field of training people to be teachers of adults. At present no teacher training institutions have a program for preparing educators to teach adults. Almost all teachers who work within the limited number of frameworks for adult learning were trained to teach children and youth within the formal education system. Some have participated in minimal continuing education to be able to adapt their teaching skills to teaching adults.

Both the Learning Star model and the principles listed above require training of teachers of adults who will be able to lead the adult learning processes that are vital for all sectors of society to enable it successfully grapple with Israel's societal and economic challenges in the 21st century and provide all citizens with quality of life.

**References**


Cohen, R. (pending publication). *An Educational Pact – Adult Learning, the Triangle of Encounter and the Star Model*.


