Training Teaching Staff in "Achiya": Pioneers in an Ultra-orthodox Boys’ School

Roi Canaan*

Achiya is an ultra-orthodox (haredi) teacher training organization. This article surveys its development from its establishment in the 1990s up to the present by examining it with regard to parallel processes that have taken place in Haredi and in non-Haredi society. The special status of the teacher in Haredi society is viewed in light of religious, cultural and employment aspects that are the backdrop for his professional training.

Modest Beginnings

On a stormy winter day in 1994, a group of 24 young men met in a modest building in Bnei Brak. They were pioneers whose goal was to lay new foundations for haredi education. They were among the first to try and apply norms of academic professional training to role of the male teacher-educator (the "melamed"). The melamed’s educational role had played an integral part of Jewish life for hundreds of years both in the Diaspora and in Israel. The institution in which those young men studied, Achiya, had been established a year previously to address the needs of learning disabled or developmentally delayed children in the haredi community. This was the first course designed to train expert ‘melamdim in the field of special education. The students, Achiya and the course itself, were to develop into an extensive network of training, counseling and care, meeting a need that at up to that time had not been addressed.

*Roi Canaan is an external consultant at Achiya.
This development was parallel to a period of fascinating social change in haredi society.

In this article I will try to sketch an outline of the growth of Achiya's teacher training center network, and to describe the social processes taking place at the same time in both Haredi society and in non-Haredi society that enabled its development.

**Growth and Development**

In the first years of its existence, the scope of Achiya's operations was limited – a few dozen students were trained in one or two classes. However in 2000, the Ministry of Education recognized Achiya as a teacher training institute, and it began to grow. Four years later, when a degree course in conjunction with Bar Ilan University in educational counseling and in didactic assessment was established, there were already 360 students in 11 classes. The growth continued and by 2012 Achiya had 1,710 students enrolled in 46 classes. These students come from all groups and factions of the haredi public, including Lithuanians, hassidim from different groups and Sephardim (Jews whose origins are in Muslim countries), residents of large haredi towns, people from the periphery of Israel and even representatives of communities abroad. Presently there are 14 educational training centers throughout Israel that are branches of the main center in Bnei Brak.
Organizational development kept in step with the growth in numbers. The course in special education has remained the biggest in the teacher training center. In addition, courses focusing on regular education, educational counseling, developmental aid and early childhood teaching (a course still in its early stages) were initiated. Hopefully, in the near future, training courses will be launched for training counsellors to work
with Haredi at-risk teenagers and for training therapists to handle the emotional needs of the Haredi child and his family.

At the same time educational frameworks such as learning centers, child development units, language kindergartens and rehabilitative centers in Bnei Brak and Elad have been founded and are staffed by graduates of Achiya.

**Training in Achiya**

At the onset of the program, it was not easy to coordinate academic norms with those of the Haredi population. When developing the curriculum, the institute's directors were careful to avoid issues that might hurt the feelings of the haredi students. Male students are taught only by men; courses take place in gender-separated buildings; the only books allowed in the center's library are professional literature; access to computers is according to permitted religious rules. Moreover, the staff also insist on contending with content that is not easy for the haredi students. They have to take courses that pose problems for them; for example, on the subject of the complex status of the special needs child, or about the difficulties of students who drop out of the yeshiva world and become social outcasts.

The profile of students who acquire their training in Achiya is very different from that of regular teacher training colleges. While in the general public teachers are mainly women, Achiya trains men, yeshiva students and kollel graduates (married men with families). There is a relatively wider age-gap between them, most aged between 24-50, than is the norm in Israeli society. Another unique characteristic is related to the Achiya students' employment background. In the first years, most of the students were teachers who had taught before they came to Achiya and wanted to improve their teaching skills (and to acquire an official
teaching diploma). Today, too, about 65% of the students have previous teaching background, while about 30% of them are Yeshiva students who have no teaching experience.

The students’ employment background
(Students in 2009 academic year)

While Achiya students with a background in teaching have varying professional experience and newly graduated yeshiva students have none, the lack of pedagogic background is common to both groups. When Achiya was established such experience was not required, and the only condition for acceptance as a teacher was proficiency in Torah (Jewish Law). It should be remembered that the study method practiced in the yeshiva is completely different from what is customary in the secular education system or in the academic world. For instance, most students who studied in Achiya had never previously encountered a lesson plan (like many of their fellow-teachers who served as counselors in youth movements or in the army). The difference in teaching methods obviously influenced the character of training in Achiya. In order to bridge the gaps, unique methods were developed for teaching Talmud,
for developing language skills and for using digital means to cope with reading disorders.

**The Wider Context – Currents and Counter-Currents**

Achiya's rapid growth should be examined against the background of changing haredi society. Haredi society is characterized as a 'society of scholars' (in the words of Prof. Menachem Friedman),¹ a society that has devoted itself to Torah study, in which the young men spend most of their time in the yeshiva, the kollel [yeshiva for married men] or beit midrash [study house] because Toratam omanutam [=Torah study is their profession], accordingly participates minimally in the work force; only 30% of haredi men are in the job market.

However, this ratio is gradually changing. Dr Yaakov Lupo has pointed to a change in attitude towards the working world in haredi society. According to him, this change began in 1996, as a result of a deep dialectic process that began due to haredi society becoming increasingly stronger and more institutionalized since the establishment of the State of Israel.² This process has a few causes: the yeshivot number tens of thousands of students, and it became increasingly clear that not everyone is suitable to be a scholar; many boys began to drop out of yeshiva, and the community, which only respected serious scholars, did not find a place for them. The yeshiva establishment faced criticism, not only from outside but also from the new haredi press. Finally, there was an increasing desire in the haredi community to raise the standard of living (at the same time as similar processes that began

---

in secular society), which was especially remarkable given the severe economic situation of haredi society from the middle of the 1990s, and which deteriorated further due to cuts in child allowances during 2003–4. All these factors encouraged the development of new institutions that offered professional academic training for men, such as the Haredi Center for Professional Training and Achiya (which trains teachers and education professionals).

As expected, the change in the attitude to the labor market did not take place without internal opposition. This focused on attacking 'secular studies,' a controversial issue since the time of the Talmud. On the one hand, "Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed by He, has nothing in this world but the four cubits of halakha alone" (Talmud Bavli, Berakhot, 8a). On the other hand, "It is good to combine Torah study with a worldly occupation, for the effort involved in both makes one forget sin, and Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin" (Ethics of the Fathers Chapter 2, Mishna 2). In recent generations this division has deepened: in the face of the abandonment of Batei Midrash (study halls) in the period of the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement. In addition, the temptations of the Zionist movement had to be resisted. As a result the Musar (Jewish Ethical) movement came into being along with the restrictive decrees that have put barriers around haredi society in the last generation. Achiya, whose founders only wanted to address the needs of children in distress, found itself, contrary to its original intention, on the firing line. This is a haredi body that is subject to Torah opinion, and its directors did not dream of disobeying their rabbis. At the same time, Achiya operates in cooperation with a recognized academic institution, Bar Ilan University, and with government authorities, instilling in its

3 Ibid., pp. 15–20.
students methods and approaches that are also based on 'the wisdom of the nations' (based on the words of the sages who said 'If you are told that there is wisdom among the nations, believe it'). Moreover, Achiya operates in one of the most sensitive areas of the haredi world – the government education system.

It is hard for a secular individual, even one accustomed to the world of education, to appreciate the daring necessary for a haredi teacher to attempt to broaden and increase pedagogic knowledge necessary for his teaching. In a world whose purpose is to train scholars, the heder and the "small' and "great" yeshivot (the institutions which are parallel, more or less, to kindergartens and elementary schools, middle school, and high school through college, respectively) have decisive importance. Furthermore, haredi society today is proud of an absence of change, maintaining a tradition that is regarded as being as ancient as the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, and nowhere is that tradition more entrenched than in the heder. The method of learning the alphabet, the use of the Torah as the sole textbook, the practice of studying in pairs are all perceived as cornerstones whose removal would topple the entire educational building. This structure is not only the paved road along which the child marches toward his future, as education is perceived in the secular world, but is a religious precept, an essential component in the relationship between man, the Jewish nation and God.

Achiya operates within this sensitive area. In the 20 years of its activity the institute's staff has initiated innovative methods, training teachers where teachers formerly had had no pedagogic training apart from studying in the kollel; introducing new study methods aimed at students with special needs and in recent years, initiating genuinely innovative programs for developing language skills (in cooperation with JDC Israel – Ashalim), and the program for introducing scientific thought in preschool. Accomplishing all this without breaching religious
limits necessitated great caution and careful maneuvering. Every step was presented to leading rabbis and authorities with an explanation as to why it was necessary, how it would be carried out and why it did not "undermine the foundations of the holy society", (in the words of a placards), but actually supported them. "We are not revolutionaries!" says Yaakov Albrecht, the first head of Achiya's training center, "We are returning to the style of haredi life that existed in the past." In this way, the institute's staff has managed, despite some attacks and protests, to remain within the central stream of haredi society until now.

It is notable that caution and remaining in the shadow of the rabbis would not have helped Achiya had the haredi world not also been gradually changing. The haredi Holy of Holies—education—has also begun to change, and there is no better mirror than the image of the teacher to demonstrate this. If in the past, as noted above, nothing was required of the teacher other than knowledge, today it is understood that he must be equipped with other skills, such as educational methods that necessitate study. This perception has been slowly accepted in the haredi world and has infiltrated the ranks of haredi education. First, it became apparent that advancing children in special education required study methods that are not just textual study of the Torah, such as, physical activity and learning through play; then these methods were gradually introduced to children in preschool and the lower grades who are not excellent students. Today, the idea that it is better for teachers of completely typical children to have broad pedagogic knowledge is taking root. It is fascinating to try and imagine what further educational changes haredi society will adopt in future, what changes will remain out of bounds and what innovations originating in Torah-haredi culture will be adopted by general society.
A Gate to the Labor Market

Achiya needed to conduct negotiations no less delicate with the secular world. Representatives of this world – universities, government ministries, local authorities and foundations – did not believe that Achiya's intention was to erode the foundations of society. They recognized, from a relatively early stage, their good intentions of advancing haredi education. But still no small effort was required in order to allay suspicion towards the haredi world, bridge the cultural gap and translate the different languages spoken by the two sides. In the past decade, as the understanding that increased integration of haredim in the labor market is essential for the Israeli economy has been recognized by the “Establishment” and particularly in the Ministries of Finance and Education, the Council for Higher Education and the Planning and Budgeting Committee, so Achiya found increased willingness on the part of the latter organizations for discussion and creating joint projects. From its establishment, Achiya was another mechanism on the way to integration in the labor market. In this context, the target was mainly the various haredi education systems, a vast employment body that is stable even in times of recession, as nearly every new annual intake of haredi children is larger than the previous one. Most Achiya graduates, about 81%, are employed in these systems. Outstanding graduates are today part of the supervisory systems of the 'recognized but unofficial' division of the Ministry of Education, and many other graduates have been absorbed in Achiya's and other intervention arrangements.
Absorption of graduates in the labor market
(Graduates of 2009 academic year – sample-based investigation)

It may very well be that in future the desire to integrate the haredi public, particularly men, in the world of employment, will make it necessary to include core subjects, as well, in the training system. Haredim who acquire these subjects in academic study frameworks, in pre-academic programs or in training centers, will be professional teachers with proven teaching skills. They will advance their students, who study in the recognized but unofficial institutions, and this will also permeate the unrecognized institutions. It is to be hoped that the these students will find it easier in the future to become integrated in a variety of different employment tracks and perhaps even within the academic world itself.