A System to Supplement Ultra-Orthodox Education – The Issue of Women

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Many articles have been written about the question of secular studies in the ultra-orthodox (haredi) education system, but there is no prospect of a genuine solution in this area. It is obvious to everyone that the alarming numbers of first grade students today who will finish school at the age of 18 without any real training for adult life in a Western country will have a significant impact on Israel’s future. Mostly, attention is given to men’s studies, as yeshiva studies do not leave any room for secular studies. However the place of women’s studies is absent from the discourse. And although there is less of a problem here, women do not yet have study tracks that will help them realize their potential and they remain part of the statistics of poverty and limited general studies.

This article will discuss a supplementary educational system that we recommend setting up for the benefit of haredi women.

The Current Situation – 'Yes' to High School, 'No' to Matriculation

In eighth grade haredi girls finish elementary school and begin secondary school– which is the equivalent of junior and senior high school. Afterwards, nearly all of them continue from the age of 18 to two additional years in a seminary (13th and 14th grades), most of them for teacher training. Some of the seminaries also offer other tracks. Although
officially only the last two years are part of the seminary, they refer to the entire framework, from eighth grade, as “seminary.”

In high school, secular subjects are taught as well as religious ones. The religious studies consist of Tanakh (Bible) classes (that are taught according to the various traditional commentators), Jewish studies, and Jewish halakhic law. The function of the religious studies is to teach a way of life that is proper, from a haredi viewpoint, in all its aspects – in the personal, family and social spheres.

Despite the importance of religious studies, secular studies take up a considerable part of the time in this framework. Unlike the men's yeshiva, where religious studies are the sole purpose of the framework, the girls' educational framework has a more practical nature and prepares them for the life of a haredi woman – and this also includes work.

Secular studies continue from 8th grade to 12th grade, and include mathematics, English, Hebrew (language, written expression, and grammar), history (Jewish and general), literature, nature and geography. During this period, together with the knowledge learned, the girls also acquire study habits in class and at home, are prepared for exams and, in practice, acquire the ability to take matriculation exams in all subjects. However most of them do not do so. About 4,500 Haredi girls take the Henrietta Szold Institute's exams each year, according to an arrangement that has existed for many years. In the haredi periphery there are indeed frameworks where the students take matriculation exams (the seminaries in Haifa, Rehovot, Netanya, Petah Tikva, and others), but those in the two big cities (Jerusalem and Bnei Brak) and in the all-haredi towns (Betar, Modi'in Illit and Elad) do not.

There are many explanations for the phenomenon, but there is only one real reason that the seminary students do not take the matriculation exams in 11th and 12th grades: the concern – justified from the point of view of the heads of the system – that the girls will “escape” to universities
with the help of the matriculation certificate, instead of continuing in the familiar course of study of 13th–14th grades to receive a teaching diploma.

One can understand the concern. Most of these young women finish 12th grade single, and a college or university in which there are a secular majority, mixed classes and a student atmosphere, is an acute and dangerous transition for young women who until then have met the strict modesty rules of the haredi Beit Ya'akov girls' schools.

*Is There a Reason to Continue this Situation?*

However, this concern should have been a thing of the past. Today, there are many institutions that offer an academic track for haredi students. Mivhar in Bnei Brak and the Haredi College in Jerusalem offer a high level university degree and a diploma identical to that given in the universities. The Jerusalem College of Technology's various branches offer degree courses in engineering as well as a BA program in a haredi framework. In addition, many colleges and universities have launched haredi campuses in recent years: beginning with the Ono Academic College, which is the longest-standing in the field, and ending with Hadassah College, Hebrew University, the Technion, the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and others – as part of the Trachtenberg Program for establishing haredi study programs under the auspices of the major colleges and universities. More and more academic courses are opening for the haredi population. It is important to note that the young women themselves prefer to attend a haredi school, for many reasons.

Therefore, the concerns about "escaping" to frameworks that are unsuitable for women is misplaced nowadays, and the decision not to take matriculation exams is still in force solely because of inertia and because of the fear of the unknown that is so typical of haredi institutions.
Given that the concern of the heads of the haredi education system is backed up with fears of an economic nature – the inferiority of the seminary education from the point of view of the young women who have already completed matriculation – it does not appear that it is possible to persuade the seminaries to prepare students for matriculation exams. In fact, there is no need to. The view that is emerging in the relationship between the state of Israel and the haredi world has been changing in recent years. As a consequence of social, economic and technological processes that have been taking place in the past decade in haredi society, the course of the haredi younger generation's integration is being determined by this generation itself.

The rabbinical establishment prefers not to delineate a clear line in certain issues, and haredi society has individual free choice (in this case – parents together with the young women). This population has a set of values that limits its choices (the problem of mixed classes of males and females, the problem of women teachers in a men's class). The second limitation is the possibilities available on the ground.

At the moment it appears that the demand for haredi higher education significantly exceeds the supply. A state that wants to encourage schools of this kind must make them accessible and open them to the haredi population. The first step is providing accessibility, opening up the possibility of participating in higher education from a bureaucratic perspective; the second step is opening the school itself.

**A Giant Step by the Ministry of Education**

In March 2012 the Ministry of Education took one of the most significant policy steps in recent years – recognition of the “Szold Diploma.” This step, when announced, made newspaper headlines that day, but did not give rise to public debate. This is, therefore, the opportunity to clarify the significance of this step.
The Szold Diploma (external examinations, or "externals" as the students call them), consists of two external exams in history (Jewish history and general history), external exams in grammar and written expression, one exam in English and one in mathematics. Recognizing the diploma produced two study units in history, two in Hebrew, three in English and two in mathematics.

Before this diploma was recognized, every graduate of a haredi high school who wanted to complete a full matriculation had to retake all the subjects, even though she had studied and been tested in some of them. Because of this, few graduates chose to do this, for obvious reasons. But now, following recognition of this diploma, every high school graduate has 12 years of schooling, the ability to study in class and at home, a broad foundation in all subjects and an additional nine study units and three subjects in which she does not have to take an exam (an additional study unit in mathematics is required as a condition for matriculation). The result is the opportunity to complete matriculation in one year only.

The Implications upon the Choices Available to Young Women

But not everything is rosy. Although this policy significantly advances the graduates of haredi seminaries, they are faced with two difficult choices. One possibility is to attempt to complete all the matriculation exams in one year. The high school graduates are required to complete at least one study unit in mathematics, three units in Tanakh, two units in literature or three in Jewish studies, two units in civics, three units in one elective subject, and four or five units in a subject at an advanced level. Some of them also want to take exams at the level of four study units in math and English (relinquishing the points that were recognized in the external exams in these subjects). Several months are required for the more difficult subjects, and matriculation
exams in the Haredi track (*Tanakh*, Judaism/literature and civics) are given only in the summer. So they have to take all the exams at the same time.

It is clear to everyone that most of the high school graduates will not manage to optimally study all the material alone, will have difficulty spreading their studies over the course of a year, and will certainly have difficulty in passing a number of exams in one or two sessions. Those who succeed in doing so will certainly not achieve the scores for which they have inherent potential, and will have difficulty reaching the grade average required to be accepted by the various haredi academic institutions. For example, the condition of acceptance to the various departments in the Haredi College in Jerusalem is an average matriculation grade above 85, some departments require an average of 90, and some also require four study units in English or mathematics.

This is not a theoretical issue. On October 31, 2012, there was heavy traffic in the Examinations Division's branch office on Kanfei Nesharim Street in Jerusalem – this was the last day to register as an external candidate since the Ministry of Education recognized the external examinations. Many haredi women, mostly aged 18–22, hurry to register and be tested alone in the coming winter and summer exams. They are all sure they will manage to be accepted at the end of this year to one of the haredi colleges. Each has a friend/sister/aunt who once registered for matriculation exams and finished them in two or three months. They know very little about the subjects, the books or the hours of study required. It goes without saying that the parents of most of them cannot afford to pay for private teachers to support the study of the above-mentioned subjects.

In the opinion of various professionals, only a small percentage will meet their objective and manage to achieve the required grade average at the end of this year. A large majority will understand that attempting to complete such a large number of subjects (especially when it includes
four study units in math and English), is almost impossible without the help of teachers.

This brings us to the second possibility. There are innumerable institutes and schools for completing matriculation, from the large, well-known companies and institutes for completing matriculation that are to be found in every big city, to the small single classes that have flourished recently, some of them in cooperation with schools throughout the country. But they all have one thing in common – they have mixed classes. There is no chance that a haredi father would permit his daughter who has just finished seminary (or 14th grade in a seminary) to enter such a class. Those who would agree to this are not regarded as haredi in the eyes of the community. This is not just a question of segregation between men and women, but the absence of haredi teachers (similar to the teachers familiar to the students from school), and the lack of an environment suitable for haredi young women (most of them are still unmarried). All the institutes' classes are situated in secular areas. Apart from this, there are problems of a lack of information regarding the academic abilities that the young women bring with them from the seminary, an inability to provide incentives for them to invest an effort in class and at home, and the inability of the existing programs to offer matriculation-completion courses for the haredi public.

However the most significant incompatibility from the point of view of this public is the price. Matriculation-completion studies of the type mentioned above may reach NIS 20,000. There are hardly any haredi parents who would be able to finance such a cost.

Therefore, despite the giant step taken by the Ministry of Education, the women face two bad alternatives, from their point of view: a mixed class – which they will not attend in any case, or studying alone at home independently, which presumably will not enable them to achieve the longed-for objective.
**The Supplementary Step – A Complete Solution for 50% of the Haredi Population**

I maintain that there is a third option: It is possible to establish study programs for haredi young women, programs in which all the teachers are haredi, all the women in the class are haredi, and the surroundings are suitable. This means classes located in haredi areas with a haredi matriculation curriculum that takes the abilities of this specific group into account.

This would be a program that can motivate the women to make an effort in class and at home, and knows how to persuade the haredi public of its legitimacy, a fact that will enable a significant part of the 4,500 young women who finish Szold exams each year to register immediately afterwards for matriculation exams. Most important – it will be a program with a "haredi price tag", i.e., one that haredim can afford.

For such a school to become legitimate, and also to preclude the large seminaries from forbidding participation in it (for many reasons, including financial ones), it must not appear as an official Ministry of Education program. Such a program would be perceived as a crude attempt by the Ministry of Education to try to influence haredi education, as in n haredi circles this could be perceived as attempted coercion on the part of the secular establishment. If the seminaries were to revoke legitimacy, no haredi parents would send their daughters to such a school, as the social consequences for them and their families would be severe.

However, it is possible to act in another way, i.e., to act wisely by presenting the project as coming from within the haredi sector itself, operating with its consent and authority where necessary, and serving only the women who need it. When parents who are paying every month for seminary, as well as for a course to complete matriculation ask for help from the Ministry of Education, no one will be able to deny the legitimacy of this act.
This is the only way that the Ministry of Education can carefully, gradually and wisely become involved in the haredi education system. This will pave the way for creating, for the first time, an educational system that can supplement traditional Haredi education.

Action that has Already Been taken and Needs Expansion and Public Cooperation

An experiment like this was carried out this year. Twenty-six young haredi women aged 18–22 from all streams of haredi Jewry are studying in a small class in Jerusalem. They arrive in the evening and study math, English, civics and the other matriculation subjects. All the teachers are haredi women with many years’ experience in preparing students for matriculation exams, and so is the principal. The class is in a haredi neighborhood, near a large seminary. The women receive all the necessary tools for success in the exams. High quality teaching, ongoing pedagogic monitoring of each student, and supervision of progress are the basic conditions of the program. In addition, the staff continuously track the students' abilities, difficulties and limitations, so that they can continue to improve the realization of their potential within the existing limitations.

We expect that at the end of this year the students will have full matriculation diplomas with high grade averages, which will enable them to enter suitable academic institutions and realize their inherent potential. This will happen with greater certainty than for young women who register for matriculation exams independently.

Today there are already demands to widen the scope of the program. But the vast difference between a few classes and 4,500 students a year is a function of price and operational ability. Only a large body such as the Ministry of Education is capable of organizing a study project so extensive that it is able to absorb 4,500 students each year. In addition,
involvement by the Ministry of Education will make it possible to lower the cost to the parents to a level that every Haredi person can afford.

Thus, there is a realistic solution for 50% of the general studies problem in the haredi educational system. The solution is not at all complicated, it can be put into operation in the immediate term, and its cost is low relative to other public projects. This solution has been presented to the decision-makers and division heads in the Ministry of Education. If they wish to, they can significantly influence the direction in which Israel is heading in the coming decades.