

Part 3 of 5

Be fruitful and multiply: illusions and facts about Israel's haredim

While the share of Haredim in Israel's population doubles every 25 years, Haredi leaders deprive their children of the basic education necessary for global economy and modern democracy

by

Dan Ben-David

The 1967 Six-Day War led to a chasm between Israel's right and left that only deepened over the years. A decade later, in 1977, the right took over the government helm for the first time. This also marked the first time that the haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) became a part of the governing coalition – and, in the process, became Israel's political kingmakers between the right and the left. With the exception of just a handful of years since 1977, the haredim have sided with the right.

The one- or two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict have been secondary considerations for the haredi parties. Their primary demands were – and continue to be – enabling their men to evade compulsory military service alongside depriving their children of a core curriculum that would provide them with serious opportunities to work in a competitive global economy and a serious understanding of the underpinnings of modern democracies. On top of all this, the haredi politicians demanded, and received, considerable government aid that led to extraordinarily high fertility rates (rising from 6 to 7 children per woman in just the decade after they joined the government) that in turn fed their perpetually growing electoral base, while enabling lifestyles of non-work – primarily among men.

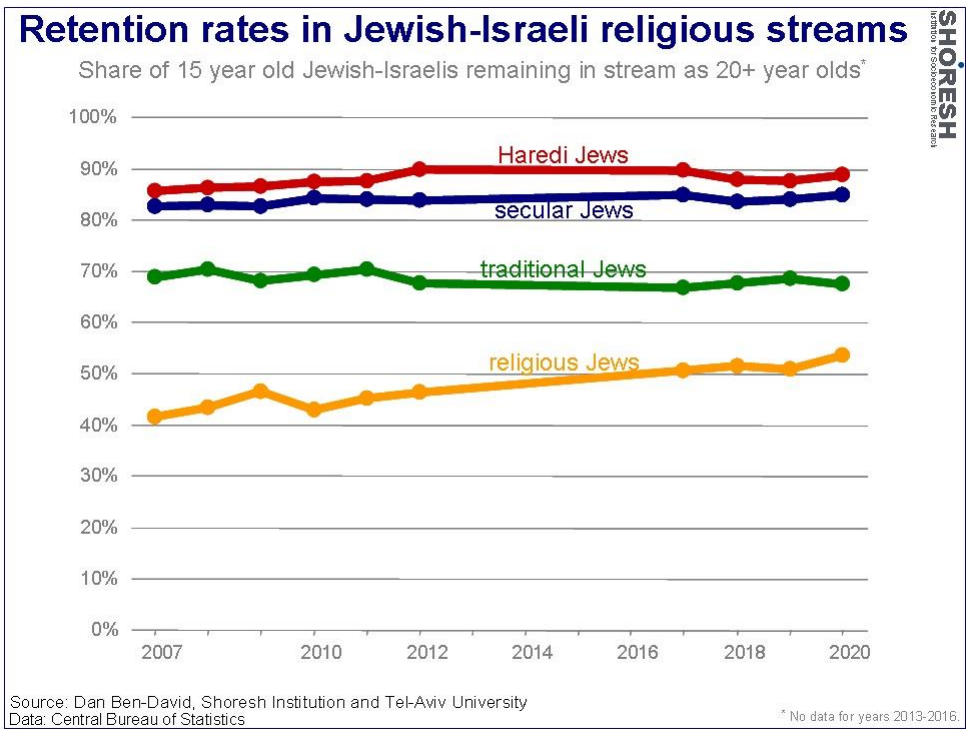
While conventional wisdom in Israel is that haredi males never worked, the facts suggest otherwise. Over 80% of prime working age (35-54) haredi males were employed in the late 1970s. This fell to under 40% in just three decades. Only when some of the benefits that they received

were cut during the major recession brought on by the Second Intifada did haredi male employment begin to rise slightly.

To avoid having to reconcile their differences with regard to the future of the territories occupied in 1967 and their inhabitants, both right and left have been willing to pay the haredim's price for nearly half a century, mortgaging the country's future for political expediency in the present. This myopic unwillingness to come to terms with what such a future will bring was ostensibly based on an assumption – fed by very partial anecdotal evidence – that as the haredi population grew and became exposed to modern society, an increasing share of its members would decide to work and study – and possibly even leave the haredi lifestyle.

The problem in a modern society bombarded with factoids is that many people tend to take anecdotes, or partial bits of information, that support what they hope is occurring, and turn these into narratives that they convince themselves are empirically based. However, when examining only selected parts of the full picture, one tends to see a misleading and deceptive depiction of reality.

Contrary to the assumptions of many, the share of haredim remaining in the religious stream that they grew up in is neither low nor is it falling. In fact, just the opposite is true. Haredi retention rates are the highest among all the Jewish streams in Israel, and they are very stable – even rising slightly during the last decade and a half.

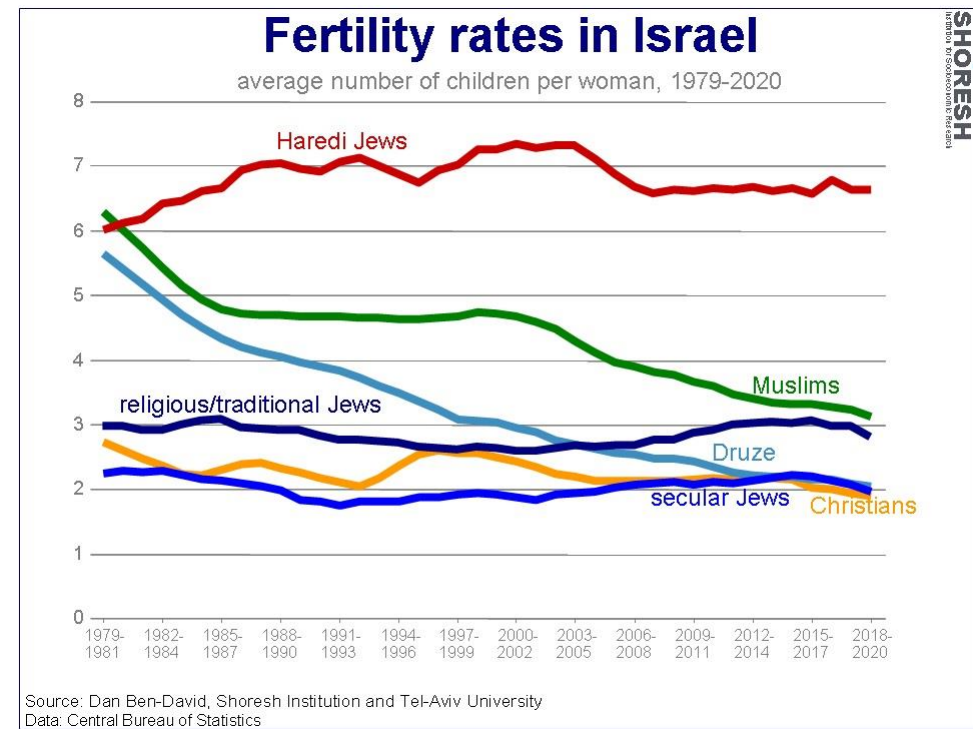
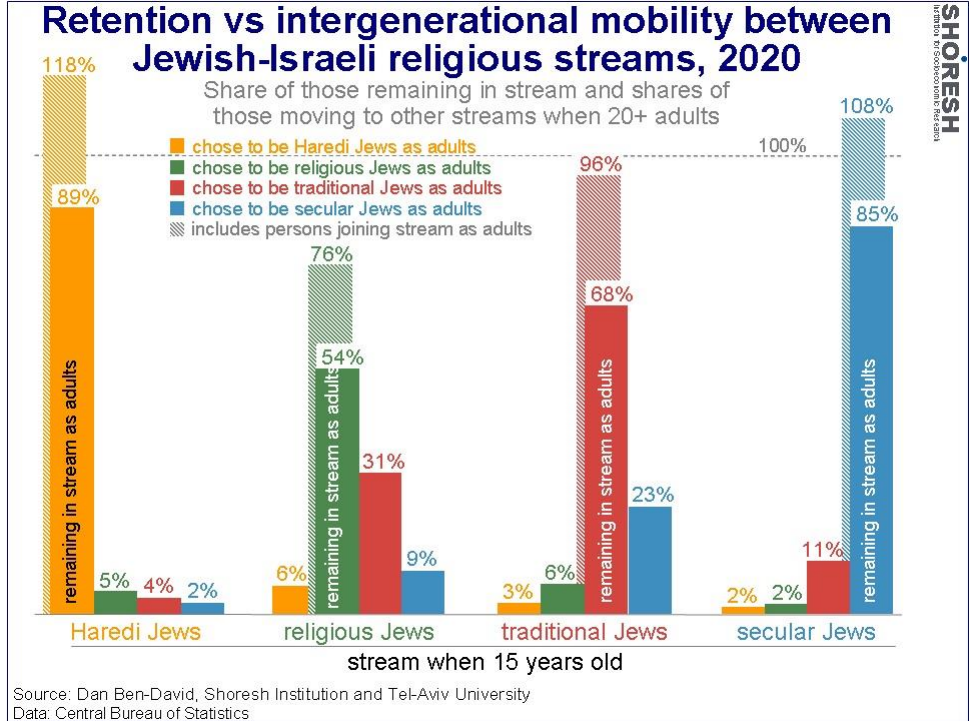


When taking into account where individuals who left their childhood streams ended up as adults, it turns out that the adult haredi population is 18% larger than all those who grew up as haredim.

However, the above data do not tell the entire story regarding the direction that Israel's Jewish population is

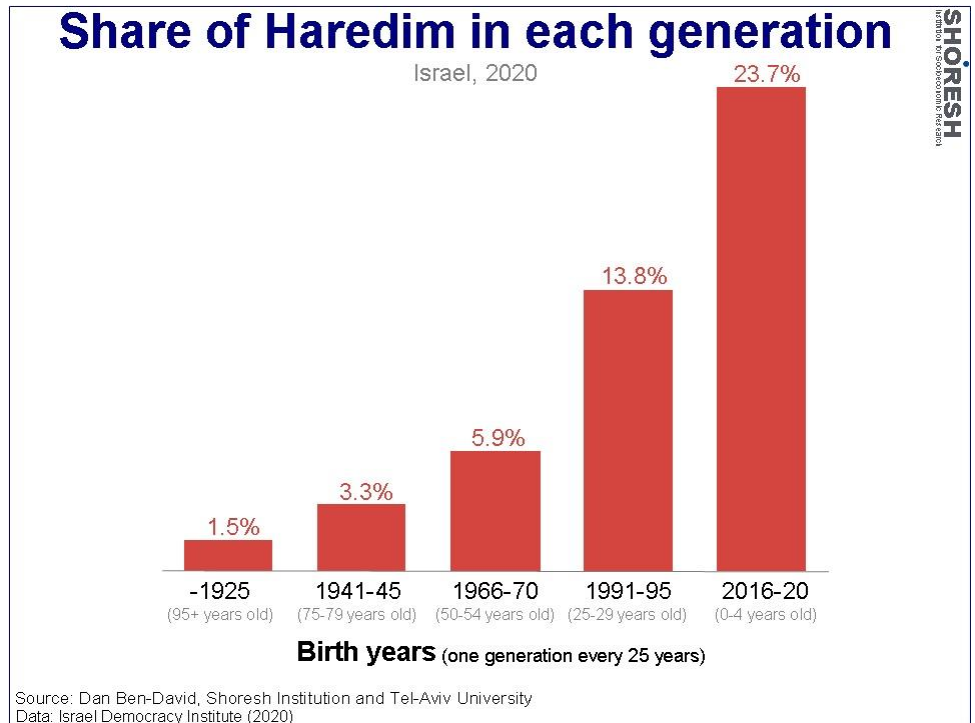
headed because it does not take into account haredi fertility rates. Not only do just a negligible number of haredim leave the stream that they grew up in, their fertility rates are also more than triple those of Israel's secular Jews. And contrary to many common beliefs, Haredi fertility rates are not falling. They have been constant at third world levels (6.6 children on average per haredi woman) during the past a decade and a half.

When all three of the above points are combined, the implication is that the haredi share in Israel's population is doubling every 25 years (i.e. every generation), from 1.5% of all people 95 and up, through



3.3% for people in their upper seventies, 5.9% for people in their low fifties, 13.8% for people in their twenties and 23.7% for infants and toddlers. The Central Bureau of Statistics forecasts that in just four decades, one-half of Israel's children ages 0-14 will be haredim.

In other words, the share of adult haredim in



Israel's population is low, and has been low for many years. This, in turn, leads many to feel that there is really no problem here, and that "we will deal with this when we absolutely have to". But haredi population growth reflects an exponential function, and this is exactly how such functions work. For a very long period of time, the problem seems minor and under control. This causes general anesthesia among those who do not understand the difference between a linear function and an exponential one.

To illustrate this point, suppose that just one thousandth of a milliliter (0.001 milliliter) of water is put into a one-liter (1,000 milliliter) bottle, and in each period the amount of water in the bottle is doubled. How many periods will it take until the bottle is full? In other words, how many periods will it take for the first amount to increase a million times over?

It takes 10 periods to reach only half a milliliter. But it takes only 5 additional periods to reach 16 milliliters. In another 5 periods, half of the bottle is full – and it takes just one more period to replicate what was done in all 20 previous periods to fill up the other half of the bottle.

During Israel's first decades, when the number of adult haredim was low and appeared to be changing slowly, Israeli society preferred to focus on the issues that appeared to be more urgent,

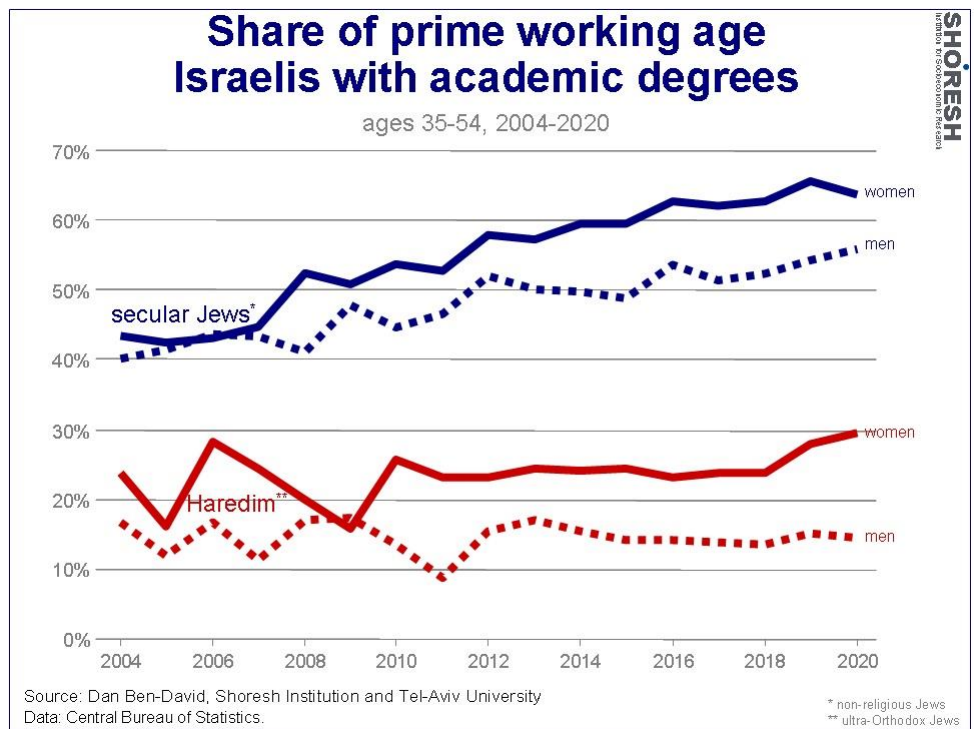
looking for and grasping reassuring bits of information that reinforced the very Israeli attitude of “everything will be okay” (*yi’hiye beseder*). As such, many did not feel the need to open up a front against the haredi leadership and demand that their children study a core curriculum as is required in every other developed country. Instead, people preferred to rely on prevailing gut feelings that adult haredim can overcome having not learned core studies as children. This belief is seemingly buttressed by the increase in the number of haredim who embark upon an academic track, despite the very low level of basic education that they received as children.

But what is important is not the increasing number of individuals – out of a population group that is itself growing very rapidly – who embark on the academic track. What matters is how many of them manage to survive the track and actually receive an academic degree. According to the State Comptroller’s Office, over half of the women (53%) and over three-quarters of the men (76%) drop out of the track that includes pre-academic preparation and subsequent academic studies – even though the vast majority of this study was at very low level academic institutions.

Contrary to the fantasies in the minds of many Israelis, there has been absolutely no change in the share of haredim receiving an academic degree (apart from a small increase among haredi women in the last two years) during the past two decades.

Like filling the bottle with water, Israel’s period from independence until the

turn of the Millennium resembles the first 10 periods that it took to fill the entire bottle (i.e., half of the necessary periods). Israel’s last 20 years are perhaps the more similar to the next five periods



in filling the bottle – when people begin to recognize the problem, but still think there is time to take care of it. However, when the issue is not dealt with while it is still possible to do so, the bottle starts to fill up at an increasing rate, until it explodes when it can no longer contain what is inside it.

Israel is hurtling forward toward a clearly unsustainable future, fueled in large part by an exponentially growing society of mostly well-meaning haredim led by cynics and opportunists – and in the case of the Shas leadership, a repeat offender convicted of corruption charges – intent on depriving their own community of any exposure to existing knowledge that would enable them to live and think independently of their leaders' dictates. When this becomes an existential issue for Israel as a whole, there is a need to say enough is enough.

Every developed country – including Israel – requires all children to go to school. Because these are innate rights that all children have to ensure that they have an opportunity at a future, no country asks parents if this coincides with their beliefs. Similarly, all developed countries – except Israel – require that this be an actual education by mandating a set of core requirements that each child must study.

It is time for Israel to join the family of developed nations in this regard. Receipt of a full core curriculum will enable haredim to choose any lifestyle they wish, providing them with the requisite tools to independently support themselves, and to make fertility decisions for which they alone will have to be responsible. The accompanying reduction in welfare benefits that have disproportionately gone their way will help sharpen the focus for all those needing a reminder of the importance of getting a good education and making decisions with regard to the number of children that they can support.