

## Israeli Information Policy, COVID-19 and the Ultra-Orthodox Haredim

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### ABSTRACT

*Against the background of the COVID-19 crisis in Israel, the country's ultra-orthodox population, the Haredim, were faced with seemingly insuperable dilemmas of compromising their religious standards for the sake of dealing with the virus. The government launched a public relations campaign to persuade this public, but its success was qualified. This study examines Israeli governmental information policy towards the Haredi population during COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 crisis, religion. Haredim, Haredi Jews, Israel, communication*

When the COVID-19 crisis hit Israel in March 2020, and Israelis were instructed by the Israeli Government in social distancing, rabbis in the ultra-Orthodox Haredi sector – against the instructions of the Health Ministry – instructed their followers to continue attending the synagogue and engage in Torah study in the *yeshivot* (institutions of advanced Jewish learning) and schools. Social distancing appeared to clash with

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cardinal values of the Haredi community: the religious obligation (*mitzvah*) of learning Torah and communal prayer. The number of Haredi Jews (ultra-orthodox) who were sick and dead from Corona in spring 2020 was very high – higher than the average in the Israeli population as a whole. The fact that many Haredim have large families and live in cramped housing conditions only added to the danger. While the Haredi press has been described, much less attention has been given to case studies of the flow of information to this audience. This study examines the role of Israeli governmental public relations and advertising and the obstacles to reach the Haredi population to observe the regulations and later to receive vaccinations.

## The Haredim

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, 12 percent of Israel's population identify themselves as Haredim. The Haredi lifestyle centres around the *yeshiva* hall and synagogue. There are several streams and sub-streams of Haredi Orthodoxy. These are non-Hassidic Haredim, Hassidic Haredim, and more recently Modern Haredim. The first, the non-Hassidic Haredim, are inclined towards study of religious texts, notably the Talmud, in religious seminaries (the *yeshiva*). This group originated in the *yeshivot* in Lithuania. While the man studies, the wife is the breadwinner and goes to work. In practice, today many of the men also work part of the day or all the time, which signifies recognition that exacting study of the Talmudic texts is not suitable for all men. The study of the Torah, both for its practical application in everyday life as observant Jews and for its own sake, is considered the highest ideal. Studying the Talmud, in the framework of partners learning together, for many hours, is considered a virtue. The Hassidim or Hassidic Haredim express their religious identity also emotionally 'from the heart', and religious experience. Divided into different Hassidic courts, the head of the Hassidic court, an *admor* is counseled for an array of decisions including marriage of children, decisions concerning education of children, place to live and work. The Hassidic rabbi is, therefore, the spiritual leader, a role combining those of teacher, source of inspiration, judge, and advisor.

The "Modern Haredim" seek to find a bridge to the modern world, including academic education, an admission of the need to be educated in

order to attain a better standard of living (Zicherman & Cahaner 2012).<sup>3</sup> A fourth group, Haredi sub-stream are Sephardi Haredim, many of whom identify with one of the three ideological approaches described above. Priority is given among all the Haredi branches to education of children. The Haredim contrast with the modern Orthodox of Judaism (who account for an estimated 15 percent of the Israeli population), which seeks to synthesize between adherence to the Torah and the modern world, as well as being full partners in modern Zionism.

### **Jewish Spiritual Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

What were the implications for Haredim of the COVID-19 crisis? As the first international disaster (apart from terrorism) since the invention of the Internet and the growth of social media, it is useful to examine how the digital media has affected Jewish spiritual life (Pearl, 2014).<sup>4</sup> In terms of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Jewish communities, attention has been focused on the question of its impact on synagogue life. The closure of synagogues in Israel raised questions about alternative strategies including online prayer services. The dangers of leaving one's house have raised questions regarding the potential of the online media in religious worship.

The COVID-19 crisis raises wider questions like what are the consequences, if any, of the Internet for Jewish prayer worship, and even what ethical message Judaism may offer for the Internet era. Orthodox Judaism, including for the Haredim, has so far rejected the possibility of online religion and online prayer services. Its leaders often cite the dictum in the Jewish law code, *Shulkhan Arukh*, that a *minyan* – the minimum number of participants needed to hold a communal prayer service – requires 10 men to be in the same room *physically*. It does not recognise the possibility that individuals located in different places being able to link up through, say, the telephone to form the *minyan*. Some prayers may only be recited as part of the *minyan*. These include the weekly Bible reading from Torah

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<sup>3</sup> Haim Zicherman and Lee Cahaner, *The Emergence of a Haredi Middle Class in Israel*, Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2012 (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Sharrona Pearl, "Exceptions to the Rule: Chabad-Lubavitch and the Digital Sphere," *Journal of Media and Religion*, 13, No. 3 (2014).

scrolls on the Sabbath, or the *kaddish* prayer recited for most of the year after the death of a blood relative.

Yet it is at times of concern and death when people most want to reach out and pray to God for divine help. People in isolation at home also need psychological sympathy and to be able to remain in touch with other people. Therefore, the Jewish legal qualification regarding streaming religious services provided was costly (non-Orthodox streaming services overcame the religious limits) (Frost & Youngblood, 2014).<sup>5</sup> In reality, there were outdoor prayer services which replaced the sheltered synagogue, such as the “balcony *minyanim*” where participants living on the same street joined from their balconies – with limited numbers of up to 20 male participants. It was a recognition by the authorities that it was better to allow some, albeit limited, communal prayer because otherwise, individuals would form their own services under more dangerous conditions.

The New Year (*Rosh Hoshonah*, when the ram’s horn [*the shophar*] is blown in synagogues) and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) in autumn are peak times for communal prayer. Religious holy days are occasions for gathering together, and the Israeli authorities, in advancing their guidelines of social distancing, were concerned about the dangers of these festivals in spreading COVID-19. One of the most potent festivals was a minor annual festival, *Lag Ba-Omer*; which occurred in the late spring when thousands of Haredi Jews paid homage to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai by visiting his grave at Mount Meron in northern Israel. A physically very small area, it was a breeding ground for COVID-19.

Another springtime festival is Passover which celebrates the Biblical exodus from Egypt. On this occasion, families usually gather together for the traditional Seder meal at the onset of the festival to celebrate and re-enact and relate the story of the Biblical Exodus to one another. Against the background of governmental guidelines not to gather together, a group of senior orthodox Sephardic rabbis in

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan K. Frost, and Norman E. Youngblood, “Online Religion and Religion Online: Reform Judaism and Web-Based Communication”, *Journal of Media and Religion* 13, No. 2 (2014).

April 2020 suggested that the Seder service at the beginning of the seven-day Passover festival could be held through a Zoom connection, enabling individuals staying alone to link up to their families. It was a revolutionary ruling since Orthodox Judaism prohibits activating electricity on holy days (as this is considered as work and therefore, an infringement of the biblical law of “rest on the Seventh Day”). A survey conducted by *Maariv* newspaper on the eve of Passover 2020 found that 33 percent of respondents said that they planned to hold their Seder via Zoom (Rosner, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

Lifecycle events such as marriages, burials, and religious celebrations like the *barmitzvah* (entry into Jewish law for boys at 13) as well as the circumcision on the eighth day after a boy is born are all occasions where people usually come together. Some funerals during COVID-19 were held via Zoom to enable relatives and friends to ‘attend’ the funeral and hear the eulogies. The custom of visitation to comfort mourners in the week following the death of a blood relative had to be limited to improvisation such as via the telephone.

In the early months after the outbreak of COVID-19, there was concern about the hygiene of using communal ritual baths by men and women respectively. The Western Wall at the ancient Jewish Temple site in Jerusalem, a popular site of prayer, was divided into capsules in order to regulate and limit overcrowding. Supervisors of kosher food, whose responsibility was to inspect that foods manufactured in factories were prepared in accord with kosher ritual standards, notably without any ingredients prohibited by Jewish laws, had difficulty to reach factories, especially those situated in far-flung parts of the world, to carry out on-site inspection.

In other spheres of Jewish life, the potential which the digital media offers was taken advantage of during the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of *yeshivot* (colleges of advanced Talmudic study) threatened religious learning. Studying the Talmud is done in the framework of students studying the text together in pairs. Also there are group *shiurim*, or religious lessons, conducted by a rabbi; or in the case of Haredi

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<sup>6</sup> Shmuel Rosner, “What makes the difference?” *Maariv* (April 8, 2020) (Hebrew).

women, religious education (such as ethical thinking or Biblical studies) by a learned female teacher. After the outbreak of COVID-19, some *yeshivot* reorganised the study hall into capsules. However, long distance learning has also entered the world of Jewish learning. For example, one *yeshiva*, the Web Yeshiva has for years provided online *shiurim* enabling individuals in the different time zones around the world to participate in *shiurim*. Skype and Zoom also provide opportunities for individuals – even Haredim who shun the Internet – to study together, ‘the *havruta*’. Online media has also enabled individuals to consult rabbis from afar and seek their advice on a host of Jewish legal questions (*halakhah*) as an alternative to consulting the local synagogue rabbi (Tsuria & Campbell, 2021).<sup>7</sup> It also offers privacy and anonymity, in contrast to the earlier model of consulting rabbis in one’s community which required one to identify oneself.

Nonetheless, the hesitancy of rabbis to exploit the potential which digital media offers raises the question whether the institutional sentiment for self-preservation of the rabbi – whether the rabbi of a synagogue or the rabbi in an educational institution like the *yeshiva* – is also a motivating factor not to fully incorporate the digital media into the life of Judaism rather than solely *halakhic* considerations?

## The Haredi Media Marketplace

Health directives failed to penetrate the Haredi sector. To understand this, it is necessary to appreciate how the media integrates – or more precisely does not integrate into the Haredi way of life (Cohen, 2012).<sup>8</sup> Their rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees (*pesuk din*) against exposure to mass media, which is regarded as a threat to Torah family values. From the appearance of newspapers in the nineteenth century, through to the development of radio and television (Neriya-Ben

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Tsuria and Heidi A Campbell, “‘In My Opinion’: Negotiation of Rabbinical Authority Online in Responsa within Kipa.co.il,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 45 (65-84), 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Yoel Cohen, *God, Jews & the media: Religion & Israel’s Media* (New York & London: Routledge, 2012).

Shahar, 2017),<sup>9</sup> and more recently, video, computers, the internet and cellular phones, Haredi rabbis have enacted decrees in response to these technological developments. Haredim seek to build cultural walls to keep out external cultural influences so as not to ‘contaminate’ true Jewish Torah values as they see them (Blondheim, 2015).<sup>10</sup> Modesty is an important motif in Judaism. The Israelite camp in the Wilderness in “which God walked shall be holy...that God should not see anything unseemly and turn Himself away from you” (Deuteronomy 23:15) is an allusion to nudity being looked on negatively (Tsuria, 2017).<sup>11</sup> Reflecting its philosophy of withdrawal from modernity, and seeking to maintain religious values in a cultural ghetto framework, the Haredi (Hebrew for ‘fearful ones’) community or ultra-Orthodox Jews have felt most threatened by the changing mass media.

The Haredi prohibitions on television and secular newspapers were the most successful of the bans against media with the overwhelming number of Haredim respecting it. Only 14 percent of Haredim read general newspapers. A 2008 survey indicated that only 33 percent of residents of the predominantly Haredi city of Benei Beraq possessed a television set in contrast to most other mixed Israeli cities where the number of households with a television set ranged from a low of 82 percent (Ashdod) to 100 percent (Rishon LeZion).<sup>12</sup> Yet the ease today to access visual content such as YouTube videos through the Internet has placed the efficacy of the ban on television under question.

The monopoly enjoyed by the Haredi party daily newspapers has been challenged since the 1980s by a commercially-orientated independent Haredi media. These are commercial attempts by

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<sup>9</sup> Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, “The Medium is the Danger: Discourse about Television among Amish and Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Women,” *Journal of Media & Religion* 16, No. 1 (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Menahem Blondheim, “The Jewish Communication Tradition and Its Encounters with (the) New Media,” in Heidi A Campbell (ed), *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Tsuria, “From Sin to Sick: Digital Judaism and Pornography,” *Journal of Religion and Media* 16, No. 4 (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem 2008.

journalists of Haredi background to deploy such techniques as modern graphics, fetching headlines, and covering a broader range of subjects than those in the party 'establishment' Haredi daily press. The openness of the new Haredi press is characterised by the fact that unlike the daily institutionalised Haredi papers, each of which covers only its own political party, the new press reports the activities of all Haredi members of the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset. And, while respecting the code of not publishing immoral content which will upset Haredi Jewish sensitivities, a new level of press freedom has been introduced in an otherwise highly hierarchical media environment. It reports and discusses behind the scenes' wheeling and dealing of, for example, the Council of Torah Sages (the umbrella board of Haredi rabbis in Israel), the politics inside the Haredi political parties, and instances of corruption in Haredi institutions.

Moreover, the Haredi news websites, including *B'Hadrei Haredim*, *Kikar Shabbot* and *Haredim 10* are an even greater challenge to rabbinic hegemony given a sweeping ban by Haredi rabbis against the Internet because of sex-related content. These Haredi sites attempt to provide a 'kosher' Internet and exclude, for example, sex-related content. The Internet is used by a considerable body of Haredi Jews today. The exposure of Haredi Jews has been heavily influenced by their spiritual leaders. In contrast to the independent weekly press or the radio stations, the websites are an even greater challenge to rabbinic hegemony given the ban by Haredi rabbis against the Internet (Cohen, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019a).<sup>13</sup> Despite rabbinical bans, rallies and other forms of mass persuasion and pressure against computers and the Internet, it is used by an estimated 30-40 percent of Haredi Jews today, albeit with control measures stipulating that

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<sup>13</sup> Yoel Cohen, "Haredim and the Internet: A Hate-Love Affair", in Michael Bailey & Guy Redden (eds.) *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century* (Britain: Ashgate, 2011); Yoel Cohen, "Israeli Rabbis & the Internet", in Heidi Campbell (ed.), *Digital Judaism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2015), 183-204; Yoel Cohen "Orthodox Jewry," in August E Grant, Amanda F C Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen, and Daniel A Stout (eds.), *Religion Online: How Digital Technology is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray, Volume 2* (California: Praeger Press, 2019a); Yoel Cohen, "Awkward Encounters: Orthodox Judaism and the Internet," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, Donner Institute, Abu Akademie Universitat, Finland, No 25, 2013, 42-54; Yoel Cohen, "The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel," *Essachess: Journal for Communication Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 113-128.



computers can only be used at work. In fact, Haredim have lower exposure to computers and to the Internet than other groups. A 2005 survey of Israelis without a computer or the Internet found that Haredim comprised the largest sector in the population. 42 percent of Haredim had no computer at home in contrast to 29 percent of the general Israeli population. Among those who possessed computers but were not linked to the Internet, 27 percent were Haredi Jews. Haredim Jews were also less inclined to be heavy Internet users. By 2015, 55 percent of Haredi households in Israel possessed at least one computer (compared to 82 percent of all Israeli households), (14 percent of Haredi households had a touchscreen computer/tablet [compared to 41 percent of all Israeli households], and 1.4 percent had a videogame console [compared to 15 percent of all Israeli households]). But the Internet was far less spread. 31 percent of Haredi households in Israel were linked to the Internet in 2015 as compared to 79 percent of all Israeli households.<sup>14</sup> All this would impact negatively when there was an urgent need during the COVID-19 for the Health Ministry to send instructions to citizens.

Haredi radio stations like Radio Kol Chai and Radio Kol Barama are governmental initiatives in recent years to pluralise and decentralise the Israeli broadcasting map in terms of geography and sector (Cohen, 2019b).<sup>15</sup> It reflects how religious populations, in particular the Haredim, feel estranged from mainstream Israeli life. Up to the mid-1990s, there were no legal religious radio stations – as opposed to a string of pirate radio stations, yet mostly religious in orientation. Some of the pirate radio stations were affiliated with supporters of the religious Shas political party, *Radio Emet* ('The Radio of Truth'), Radio 2000, mostly broadcasting inspirational content comprising religious lessons (*shiurim*) and religious songs. Mainstream radio stations (Israel Radio and Galei Zahal) fail to give expression to the Haredi belief system.

### **The 'Education' of Haredi Rabbis**

In understanding the public relation challenges for the Israeli government in distributing health directives to the Haredi population, it is

<sup>14</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Yoel Cohen, "Israeli Haredi Media and the 'female factor': the case of the Kol Barama radio station," *Israel Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2019b).

instructive to examine political and social developments inside the Haredi population in general and the conflicting – and superior – messages from their rabbis to their followers. In March 2020, governmental instructions for social-distancing, lockdowns and curfews during religious holy days and prohibitions on praying together were all perceived by Haredim as a threat to their core values and strongly felt beliefs. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, regarded as one of the spiritual leaders of non-Hassidic Haredi Jewry in Israel, issued a directive to the faithful not to obey the rules of social distancing, but continue with synagogal worship and *yeshivot*. The Torah protects us, intoned the learned rabbi. But as more and more Haredim got sick, some *yeshivot* and schools, however, did close their doors. So did many synagogues.

Many Haredim, not being exposed to television and the Internet, and in some cases, even a radio set, were not themselves exposed to the news about casualties from COVID-19, and acceded to the rabbi's instructions. In a certain sense, the hesitancy of Kanievsky and other Haredi rabbis to 'support' the government directives may be seen as reflecting Haredi rabbis' lack of secular education, leading to suspicions of scientific research including medical research. The unknown nature of the virus in the early part of 2020 only strengthened the rabbis' refusal to renege on challenges to the all-embracing dictum to study the Torah.

In a letter which was intended to be published in the newspaper *Yated Neeman*, which is identified with non-Hassidic Haredim, Kanievsky explained his position why *yeshivot* should stay open. Nonetheless, in an unprecedented step, and on the instructions of another rabbi, Gedaliah Edelstein, head of the elite Ponevezh Yeshiva in Benei Beraq, the paper did not publish it. Edelstein instead favoured adhering to the government instructions. In part, all this reflects the wide gaps between the Haredim and the modern Israeli state. Other protective measures such as not wearing a mask were seen as a declaration of protest. But it was also a statement of trust in a Higher Being. Indeed, the even more extreme wing of the non-Hassidic Haredim, the so-called Jerusalem faction, which identified with the later Rabbi Shmuel Aurbach, was even more resistant. Thus, the very fact that a secular state body like the Health Ministry instructed a ban on social distancing was itself a reason not to respect it. On the other hand, Sephardim Haredim were more inclined to accept the government

directives. Much depended also on each Hassidic stream; the Gur Hassidim, one of the largest groups, accepted the governmental directives.

The Haredi media itself walked a fine line between, on the one hand, publishing the views of the rabbis in rejecting the directives, in particular in those Haredi daily newspapers published under the auspices of the rabbis themselves (Baumel, 2005),<sup>16</sup> and publishing and even supporting the directives of the government by, for example, documenting the number of deaths as well as the overcrowded situation in Israeli hospitals (Cohen, 2021).<sup>17</sup> However, by September 2020, the situation worsened when thousands of Haredim became sick. In August 2020 Haredi schools reopened despite government directives otherwise. In actuality, some Haredi schools did institute distance learning via the telephone, but this was not very practical for pedagogic reasons, with offline interaction in the classroom far preferred. The months of September and October were a time of communal prayer and various activities celebrating the New Year, Day of Atonement and even the seven-day long Tabernacles (Sukkot) Sukkot Festival. Thus, in October 2020 Haredi towns like Bnei Beraq and Modiin Illit had a daily average of 223 and 293 COVID-19 cases out of 10,000 residents, respectively. On the other hand, mixed or non-Haredi towns like Givatayim and Hod Hasharon only averaged 21 and 24 out of 10,000 residents per day, respectively.

With the governmental closure of key Haredi towns and restricting movements in an attempt to stop the virus from spreading to other parts the country, riots against the police occurred. In the face of this situation, Haredi politicians also lost face in ‘the Haredi street’ for failing to influence the government to reopen the cities and getting government dispensations for the closure of educational institutions. This was despite

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<sup>16</sup> Shmuel Baumel, *Sacred Speakers: Language and Culture among the Haredim in Israel* (Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Yoel Cohen, Bruria Adini, and Ahuva Spitz, “The Haredi media, religious identity, and the COVID-19 crisis,” *Israel Affairs* (August 2021); Bruria Adini, Yoel Cohen, and Ahuva Spitz, “The Relationship between Religious Beliefs and Attitudes towards Public Health Infection Prevention Measures among an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Population during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (2022): 2988.

the fact that the Health Minister, Yaacov Litzman himself came from a Haredi political party. In part, after the death of Rabbi Leib Steinemann in 2017, who had been the recognised leader of non-Hassidic Haredim, the absence of a successor meant there was no single rabbi who could quell the riots.

The arrival of vaccines to Israel at the end of 2020 and programmes to mass vaccinate in 2021 heated matters yet further. Governmental policy sought to encourage rather than force people to be vaccinated, notwithstanding that those unvaccinated were required to take antigen tests to verify that they were not affected. Because there was uncertainty about the effects of vaccinations, more Haredim than secular people declined governmental calls to get vaccinated. Consequently, in February 2021, Haredim made up then 28 percent of COVID-19 victims in Israel, despite accounting for only 12 percent of the population. This reality added to secular-Haredi tensions, with some in the broader secular public charging the Haredi with endangering the entire public by not getting vaccinated or ignoring social distancing directives. The secular Israeli media became important means for expressing these charges aimed at the Haredim. Yet, as more understanding about the vaccines emerged, by summer 2021, many rabbis, including Kanievsky, were more supportive of vaccinations – even for those under the age of 20. Indeed, Kanievsky said that teachers who did not become vaccinated should be suspended from work. At the same time, the Education Minister herself was inclined to keep schools of all types, religious or not, open at all costs.

### **Israeli Public Health Media Relations during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Israeli governmental public relations are characteristic of other Western democratic societies. Falling back on major wars, including the 1967, 1973, and 1982 Arab-Israeli Wars, and the 1990 Gulf War, or low intensity conflicts like the Intifada, there exists an infrastructure as well as experience among successive governments in public relations for dealing with national emergencies. The Army Spokesman and Foreign Ministry had exceptional experience in dealing with the public during

times of national conflict. But the COVID-19 crisis found the Health Ministry's public relations effort to be lacking and its spokespersonship inadequate. Moreover, the initial lack of medical and scientific knowledge about COVID-19 caught them unprepared. The fact that the government also improvised and changed strategies frequently to cope with the crisis only complicated and confused the Israeli public.

The government's Bureau of Advertising, a service agency for governmental advertising, played a pivotal role in transmitting the Health Ministry instructions to the Israeli public. The Health Ministry worked in PR during COVID-19 to the Haredi population as they did in the general Jewish population. The second of two special audiences was aimed at the Arab population. In preparing the PR material, attention was given to Haredi language, culture, leaders, and customs. But while PR targeting the general Israeli population began with the outbreak of the disease as early as January 2020 with the outbreak in Wuhan, China, activities targeting the Haredi population only began on March 2. Consequently, for the initial period, there developed a gap in the knowledge level between the Haredi and the general Israeli populations.

The relationship between the Haredim and the Israeli state is complicated for multiple reasons. Notable is the Haredi opposition that the Jewish state is not run strictly in accordance with religious law (apart from matters of personal status such as conversion, marriage, and divorce) as well as particular questions like the national draft for Haredi young men. The way the state has responded to the Haredim over the years has created suspicions and enmity. In addition, large families and crowded dwellings complicated the public relations effort, both in terms persuading them to adhere to preventive measures like social distancing. Moreover, unlike the mainstream Israeli Jewish population, the Haredi population was not exposed to the media through which the Health Ministry conducted the main public relations campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, notably television, which the Haredim do not possess. In the beginning the Health Ministry used fliers and film advertising with the participation of senior doctors in the medical sphere. In addition, it used telephone messages as well as chat messages transmitted through various social network platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram - despite that

most Haredim are not on social media. Unfortunately, there was a failure prior to the arrival of the coronavirus to Israel (at the end of February 2020) and afterwards to identify the channels for reaching the Haredim. The Bank of Israel in 2020 reported that the Haredim was 6.2 times more likely to get sick from COVID-19 than the broader Israeli Jewish population. At the beginning of February 2020, the Health Ministry began a public relations programme for the general Israeli Jewish population emphasising the importance of hygiene. The material was also distributed to the Haredi press and Haredi websites. Beginning in March, a film suitable for the Haredi population was produced. It had the participation of a Haredi doctor, and messages were put out on the Haredi radio station, Radio Kol Chai, and wall posters, which is the traditional way for rabbis and religious Haredi bodies to reach their followers. The public relations operation targeting the Haredi population was much more limited than the one aimed at the general Israeli Jewish population.

In March 2020 the limits on social gatherings were strengthened. The first religious event was the Purim Festival in March. On March 12, 2020, a decision was made to close schools and gatherings of more than 10 people were prohibited. On March 15, universities and large sections of the economy were also closed. Limits were also placed on the number of people who could enter stores, and shopping malls were also closed for certain periods of time. Certain Haredi towns were later declared closed zones, including the Haredi towns of Bnei Berak, Bet Shemesh, and Netivot as well as certain Haredi sections in Jerusalem. On April 2, following a high level of sickness in the Haredi city of Bnei Beraq (situated near Tel Aviv) it was declared a closed or restricted area with limits on people coming in or leaving. There were delays in preparing information sent out to the general Jewish population until it was edited, and framed, and stylised for the Haredi audience.

Towards the Passover Festival in April there was an increase in PR activity to warn visitors about social distancing. In addition, there were direct mailings, pashkevillim, loudspeaker announcements in Haredi neighbourhoods totaling 360 hours. There were also announcements in the Haredi newspapers and news magazines, five Internet websites, and two Haredi radio stations (Radio Kol Chai and Radio Kol Berama).

The campaign also made use of about 50 brief films which included calls by rabbis to social distance, and some 13 booklets, of which four were distributed each with 200,000 copies. Another means to spread the information was IVR (Interactive Voice Response) telephone messages totalling 13 million notices. The information campaign also included interviews with experts from the Health Ministry which appeared in Haredi media, PR material intended for children and women,<sup>18</sup> and films especially prepared for the Haredi population with speakers modestly dressed, few women, and if so appropriately dressed.

Towards the second half of March 2020, the Israeli authorities urgently turned to a public relations company specialising in the Haredi population to strengthen the PR effort targeting this group. In July 2020, the Bureau of Advertising recruited some advertising personnel who were closely acquainted with the Haredi population. As a result, PR operations increased in the form of direct mailing to Haredi houses, wall posters, loudspeakers announcements, telephone calls propagating the information from the Health Ministry.

By the second half of March, another agency, the Israeli Army's Home Front,<sup>19</sup> became involved. It was asked to beef up the overstretched resources of the Health Ministry. Because the IDF drew on reservists, it was suitable for the work of going from house to house in Haredi areas to distribute materials including food and other materials. Soldiers who spoke the Yiddish language used among some Haredim were called up for the task. All this was necessary because 31 percent of Haredim said they did not know either the website or the telephone number for information of the Health Ministry (and 46 percent did not know the address of the website or the telephone number for the Home Front). Only 19 percent of Haredim knew just the telephone number for information, while only 1 percent knew just the website. 49 percent knew both the website and the telephone number; and regarding the Israeli Army's Home Front - 46 percent. Fifty-three percent of Haredim knew the telephone number of the Health Ministry. 60 percent of Haredim said that

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<sup>18</sup> There is a long tradition of special women's magazines in the Haredi sector.

<sup>19</sup> The Israel Army's Home Front dealt with such work as the distribution of gas masks during the Gulf War to the Israeli domestic public.

the answers they got from their inquiries were sufficient; 33 percent were unsatisfied; 2 percent got the information they wanted from another source; and 5 percent replied that nobody answered their inquiries.

In addition, the Health Ministry turned to Haredi public figures such as rabbis on the assumption that communication by community religious leaders would be accepted among the Haredim who insisted on holding public prayer and on keeping schools open for the sake of education. Beginning in March 2020 the Health Ministry issued hundreds of press releases, brief films with rabbis and with COVID-19 patients to emphasise the need for social distancing and good hygiene. Once vaccines from Pfizer were available and began to reach Israel in December 2020 and January 2021, the public relations effort began to focus on encouraging Israelis to get vaccinated. However, the policy was encouragement rather than force. Eventually access to certain institutions, including educational venues, became limited to those who were vaccinated or could prove they were not infected by the virus.

*Budgeting:* A seeming imbalance in advertising and public relations activities continued to 2021. Between January and November 2020, a total of 217 million shekels (65.8 million USD) were spent in advertising for COVID-19 mostly to the broader Israeli Jewish population. 36 million shekels (10.9 million USD) was spent for advertising and public relations activities targeted to specific streams: 13.7 million shekels (4.2 million USD) for the Haredi sector which proved to be a considerable increase, partly following criticism of an alleged imbalance. Other streams included: the Arab sector (accounting for 21 percent of the population) - which was allocated 15.3 million shekels (4.6 million USD); the Russian sector (reflecting the large number of immigrants to Israel from Eastern Europe) - 3.6 million shekels (1.1 million USD); modern Orthodox (15 percent of the population) - 2.6 million shekels (0.8 million USD). The smallest portion was allocated to the Ethiopian immigrants (who speak Amharic) - 639,000 shekels (193,600 USD).<sup>20</sup>

Of the 5 million shekels (1.5 million USD) which had initially been allocated for the Haredi sector, 33 percent was spent on advertising

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<sup>20</sup> Report of the Knesset's Center for Research and Information.



in the digital media sector,<sup>21</sup> 28 percent in printed Haredi daily newspapers and magazines, and 24 percent on wall posters. The remainder was used for street loudspeaker campaigns; in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, on public relations campaigns. In addition, they spent 4.7 million shekels in external consultations and beefing up for special audiences such as the Haredim audience. 82 percent of the budget went to the general Israeli Jewish audience, and 5 percent to the Haredi audience. 10 percent of the budget was used targeting the Arab audience, and 3 percent on other groups.

In the first two months of the COVID-19 crisis (up to mid-2020), of the 34,325,000 shekels (10.4 million USD) spent in advertising by the government's Bureau of Advertising, only 1,580,000 shekels (479,000 USD) was allocated to the Haredi sector, which at the time felt the brunt of COVID-19 with a large number of people hospitalised. The imbalance in budgeting against the Haredi population was the subject of an investigation by the Haredi newspaper, *Hamevaser*.<sup>22</sup> The report claimed that there was great imbalance in budgeting considering that the Haredim accounted for 20 percent of the Israeli Jewish population. Although the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the governmental unit for examining trends in the country's population, believes that the Haredim only account for 10-12 percent of the population, the imbalance in advertising budgeting remains true.

The State Comptroller's Report on PR during the COVID-19 crisis, however, has argued that it would be wrong to measure this breakdown according to the size of the population because, for example, advertising on television was the most expensive operation, but most Haredim did not watch television. Only 8 percent of Haredim possessed a television set. On the other hand, newspaper advertising (used in the Haredi case is clearer), as was using rabbis and Haredi public figures was inexpensive, and wall posters, or advertising in the digital media were also cheaper than television advertising.

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<sup>21</sup> This was despite that 42% of Haredim do not have a computer at home, and 72% have no Internet connection.

<sup>22</sup> Yaacov Lustingman, "Hitalmut Hamevaser" (June 12, 2020) (Hebrew.).

Advertising and public relations in an open democratic society does not have sole monopoly of the flow of communication reaching the public. Far more important is the free media, which drew on governmental and non-governmental sources. Specialised medical reporters were in part dependent upon sources inside the Health Ministry. Other news sources depended upon by reporters were health funds and academic medical experts. Yet, as Ido Efrati, medical reporter of the *Haaretz* daily found, the information flow to Israeli journalists from the Health Ministry was limited. According to Efrati, only a select group of people were granted access to the raw data collected by the Health Ministry, and which was not accessible to the public at large, public health officials, or researchers. The feeling inside the Health Ministry was that releasing the information might lead to various interpretations and so it was best to grant only certain people access to the information.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the Health Ministry information campaign had fewer opposing messages reaching the public, and therefore greater control over the message to the people.

*Effect of the Public Relations Campaign:* The final and ultimate question in any public relations operation is: What was the result? Was the audience influenced or not? The initial question is: What was the level of exposure to government communications? But the second or more important question is whether people were persuaded or not to act according to the communication. A survey conducted by the State Comptroller’s Office in December 2020 found that the medium most seen was advertisements in the Haredi media – 76 percent (by comparison to 73 percent with the general Israeli Jewish audience). The level of exposure to other media is as follows:

- Announcements made by rabbis and Haredi public figures were seen by 75 percent of Haredim (general Israeli Jewish - 12 percent);
- Explanations and articles of experts - 55 percent (versus 65 percent);
- Press releases by local authorities – 54 percent (versus 48 percent);
- Stories of COVID-19 patients – 52 percent (versus 50 percent).
- Press conferences – 35 percent (versus 74 percent).

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<sup>23</sup> Ido Efrati, “Crucial Coronavirus Info Unavailable to Israeli Public, Ministers, and Decision Makers,” *Haaretz* (April 23, 2020).

In terms of the effects of these channels, there were major differences between the effect and the exposure to the channels. For Haredim, the percentage of people who were persuaded by various media is as follows:

- Press conferences - 40 percent (35 percent exposure among Haredim);
- Stories of patients recovering from COVID-19 - 38 percent (52 percent exposure);
- Announcements from rabbis - 25 percent (75 percent exposure);
- Commentaries and articles by experts - 22 percent (55 percent exposure);
- Handouts by local authorities - 22 percent (54 percent exposure);
- Advertisements – 17 percent (76 percent exposure).

The results of the survey are of utmost significance. Apparently, advertisements - one of the major efforts which took a hefty part of the budget - was not very persuasive in the final analysis. In addition, announcements by rabbis, which were expected to have a lot of impact, were only found persuasive by a quarter of Haredim, despite having seen by 75 percent of the respondents. (Also noteworthy, by contrast, is that in examining the Arab sector in Israel, the State Comptroller's report found that 87 percent of the respondents said they were persuaded by their religious leaders). On the other hand, stories of COVID-19 patients, while listened to by 55 percent of the respondents, had an impact of 38 percent. Finally, only 22 percent of the respondents were influenced by expert assessments, which had a 55 percent exposure.

There were significant similarities and differences in comparing the data from the Haredim to the general Israeli Jewish audience. According to the survey, commentaries by medical experts were persuasive for 55 percent of the general Israeli Jewish audience in contrast to only 22 percent of Haredim. As for press conferences broadcast on television, only 15 percent of the general Israeli Jewish population found them to be persuasive, in contrast to 40 percent of Haredim. This is surprising because Haredim, in contrast to the general Israeli population, are not exposed to television which broadcast the press conferences. The only similarities shared by these two groups are seen in the level of influence from stories by recovering patients: 38 percent for Haredim and 40 percent for the wider Israeli Jewish audience);

and most surprisingly, rabbis' statements: 25 percent for both groups (State Comptrollers Report 2021).<sup>24</sup>

The need to avoid social distancing was particularly difficult to convey to Haredim. So, the key question of whether Haredim listened to the Health authorities or to the rabbis is not conclusive. As seen from the State Comptroller's Report, while 75 percent of Haredim listened to the announcements by rabbis, only 25 percent of them were persuaded by what they heard. One of the reasons why the PR effort failed to have an impact among the Haredim was that calls for social distancing failed to relate to the importance of religious education in the *yeshiva*; almost all the Haredim did not possess necessary technological equipment for Zoom communications, nor does the superior importance given to communal prayer.

## Conclusion

As a country encouraging immigration to the Jewish homeland, the need for Israeli officialdom to address differently in tone specific religious audiences is not new. This is in addition to some 20 percent of its population comprising Arabs. COVID-19 was one of the first emergencies in Israel's seventy year long history when a government information campaign had to be conveyed in different terms, using different cultural symbols, and different channels to an audience. Problems of targeting messages to the audience go back at least to 1968 with the arrival of television in Israel – upon which Haredi rabbis imposed a ban. But COVID-19 was the first event since the development of the Internet and social media. Yet the government, including its Bureau of Advertising, failed to draw upon a collective memory in reaching out to the Haredi population. Moreover, the key question of the influence of Haredi rabbis over their community – and that in practice, their followers were not so persuaded as the first impressions might have led to believe – underlines the need for the Bureau of Advertising to evaluate critically the best means through which to reach religious audiences and the appropriate resources to deploy.

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<sup>24</sup> The State Comptroller's 'Office, *Hasbara* (Public Relations) during the COVID-19 crisis. The data in this section draws from the Report.

The Israeli case study is relevant to studying how other societies with different religious groups function at times of emergency. First, in the United States, many Haredim in New York died from COVID-19 in similar circumstances to those in Israel. But it is also instructive for studying in other societies where information technology is either not available or prohibited, and how key medical information fails to reach certain groups. One by-product though in the Israeli Haredi case was that some of their members, notably from the Modern Haredim sub-stream, became linked up to the Internet in order to gather health related information. Given the longitude of COVID-19, their exposure to the Internet technology may become permanent in the long term.

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