



The Haredi Community

Clive Lawton

Jews make-up less than one half of one per cent of the UK population. Given that tiny proportion, we do a pretty good job of putting ourselves about. Many, if not most, people in Britain know a Jew or Jews, and, where there are Jewish communities, they make strenuous efforts to visit schools, open our synagogues and help teachers understand Jews better. Some like to claim that Jews 'keep themselves to themselves', but all the evidence and experience points in the opposite direction.

Well, nearly all. There is one segment of the Jewish world which could fairly be described as 'keeping itself to itself', though, as I shall explain later, even that generalisation has its noteworthy exceptions.

About 10% of British Jewry can be categorised as 'Haredi' or, as they rather misleadingly are called in the non-Jewish world, 'ultra Orthodox'. Paradoxically perhaps, this is the most visible and distinguishable segment of the Jewish world but also the least well known and understood. The word 'Haredi' (plural 'Haredim') comes from the Bible. It describes the reaction of the Israelites at Mount Sinai. They 'shook' or 'quivered' in awe. So, oddly enough, they've taken upon themselves the Hebrew equivalent of Quakers!

On a superficial level, Haredi men can be recognised by their dark clothes – sometimes frock coats and even knee breeches – and broad-brimmed black hats. Sometimes they have side curls and occasionally, especially on Shabbat, round fur hats. Haredi women are a little harder to spot. They will always be modestly dressed: long sleeves, high necklines, skirts below the knee, avoiding figure-hugging clothes. Married women will have their hair covered, but sometimes only by a wig, so it'll take a practised eye to spot it. Taken overall, the clothing code for men and women is one of modesty and restraint, refusing to pursue fashion, but for some also, dressing in a manner which connects them with the period of their founder.

Which brings me to the erroneous impression that Haredim are somehow more traditionally Orthodox than, say, the Chief Rabbi, who doesn't dress in this way. The Haredi approach to Judaism is largely another response to the Enlightenment and Modernity. While some embraced secularism or Zionism or sought to reform Jewish religious practice with modern sensibilities or tried to find some means of accommodating to modernity without changing the central practices of Orthodoxy, a proportion of Jews, the Haredim, attempted to halt any changes or developments and freeze the key aspects of their lives in pre-Enlightenment forms. This does not mean they reject technological advances per se – they will happily drive cars, use videos, mobile phones, planes, microwaves and so on – but they will distrust cultural developments and potential erosions, so they treat the cinema, TV, much of the internet and so on with considerable suspicion.

Their lives are modestly lived. They don't holiday much or eat out or buy lots of things. They don't play golf or go to the gym. Even rich Haredim will tend to drive old beat-up cars. They devote their resources to their children and those less fortunate than themselves in the Haredi community worldwide. The men devote their free time mostly to Jewish study and increasingly that is becoming a trend for the women too. Frequently, they will have many children – eight or nine is not uncommon and fourteen or fifteen is not unknown. They grow up sharing what little they have and they continue in their lives that way. They are generally law-abiding and obedient and they follow the guidance of their rabbis and parents. They do not date or flirt and generally the sexes don't mix. Most will marry one of the people introduced to them, though of course they have the right to refuse to marry until they are introduced to a partner they think they will like.

But I have generalised too much already. Most UK Haredim live in north London, north Manchester and Gateshead, outside Newcastle – the last the site of one of the most prestigious and high-achieving colleges of traditional higher Jewish study in the world. If you haven't visited those parts you might not have seen a real live Haredi – though you almost certainly have seen them in films and photos. But despite outward appearances and what I've written above, they are by no means all the same as each other.

The first great division is between Hasidim and Mitnagdim. The word 'Mitnagdim' means 'opponents' and was applied to the group that resisted the development of Hasidism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Hasidim follow the teachings of a man called the Baal Shem Tov who flourished in Eastern Europe during the 18th century. His disciples took his teachings further and over the course of the next 200 years Hasidim flourished and spread. The essential features of Hasidism were already evident in its early years. It accentuated feeling over study and stressed the capacity of the ordinary Jew – working people, often in grinding poverty – to achieve higher standards of encounter with God than perhaps the 'holy' scholar. Great play was made of mystical teachings (a field which until that time was mostly considered esoteric and reserved for scholars), and Hasidim were encouraged to dance and sing their way to God.

One can certainly see aspects of the celebratory features of Hasidism in the film *Fiddler on the Roof*, and Tevye's simple approach to God is clearly Hasidic. It remains true that Hasidism is indifferent to modern developments since the essential life is lived in the same manner as its founding teachers managed more than 200 years ago in Poland and Ukraine. It is important therefore not to misunderstand the sober costumes of Hasidim. They are not dour or solemn, simply not flashy. There are few more joyous events than a Hasidic wedding or celebrations of festivals. However, on the street, Hasidim are, as it were, in neutral, often hurrying somewhere so as not to waste a precious moment which might be spent on study, prayer or with family.

But still I over-generalise. As different disciples of the founders taught in slightly different ways, a whole host of groups have grown up which are different one from another in terms of the accent they place on aspects of Hasidism and general Jewish teachings. Most of these groups are named after the towns where they developed and they can be distinguished in many cases by subtle differences in styles of clothing and by which authorities they are most likely to listen to.

One of the most controversial features of Hasidism to other Jews is the tremendous commitment to the 'Rebbe', the dynastic leader of each Hasidic sect who is considered to have exceptional insight and access to true teaching. As a result, most Hasidim will submit most significant decisions – who to marry, whether to move house, what job to take – to their Rebbe's consideration. Even this is an over-generalisation, because the Bratslav Hasidim have been doing without a Rebbe for more than a century and the much more famous Lubavitch Hasidim have not (yet) replaced their Rebbe after he died a few years ago.

This last group, the Lubavitch (Lubavtich is a small town in Russia), are perhaps the best known Hasidim. They have sought to re-accentuate the importance of study while not relinquishing the charismatic aspects of Hasidic life. Unlike all other groups of Hasidim, they have prosecuted an active programme of engagement in the wider Jewish world so that a significant number of the rabbis of mainstream Orthodox communities in the UK, for example, are Lubavitch. Furthermore, they seek to play some part in wider society too. It is a Lubavitch Hasid who has set up a Jewish Muslim Forum in North London and another Lubavitcher, Arye Forta, who has written one of the best known textbooks on Judaism for GCSE.

The Mitnagdim, mentioned earlier, were shocked by the development of Hasidism over 200 years ago. They distrusted its charismatic nature, they disliked its suggestion that learning was not necessary to achieve holy Jewish outcomes, and they felt that the general tendency of Hasidism to suggest that it's the spirit that counts rather than meticulous attention to the details would serve as a serious undermining of the essentials of Jewish life. The Mitnagdim, centred originally in Lithuania and its impressive network of colleges of higher Jewish learning, maintained a continuous battle with Hasidism until the last few decades. In recent years both groups appear to have tacitly agreed that Progressive Judaism on the one hand and secularism on the other represent greater dangers to the continuity of Judaism and so in general they are now to be found fighting on the same side. However, from time to time, the old distrusts and disapproval flare up.

Perhaps one of the most famous recent public portrayals of Haredim was when a small group of Haredi Jews went to Iran to join in a conference organised by the Iranian government titled 'Conference on the Holocaust' to express their anti-Zionist convictions. This tiny group, the Neturei Karta, represents perhaps a few hundred Jews at most in the world and they were roundly condemned by all other Haredi groups. However, most Haredim do not believe that the Zionist endeavour to create a Jewish state is a centrally important feature of Jewish life, unlike most other committed Jews in the world. Hasidim generally believe that a Jew can live just about anywhere and connect, given their highly individualistic and mystical approach to relationship with God, and many Haredim believe that since God punished the Jews by exile we must be very careful indeed, if we choose to return to the Land, not to suggest that we are being indifferent to His judgment. This does not prevent a significant Haredi participation in Israeli politics and of course a huge population of Haredim resident in Israel.

While the rest of the Jewish world seeks to memorialise and study the Holocaust, Haredim have children. Their programme of reconstruction is simple and determined and most Jews now perceive a significant demographic shift in the worldwide Jewish community as Haredim have doggedly rebuilt their numbers after the massive depredations of the Holocaust.

So the Haredi community is actually extremely diverse and there is certainly nothing like a single body that speaks for them. But their capacity to co-operate when there is a welfare or social need and their determination to support each other offers an impressive example to the rest of the Jewish and perhaps wider world.

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