

## The Role of Philanthropy in the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Community in Israel

Bezalel Cohen<sup>1</sup> and Rachel Ibenboim<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

“And if thy brother shall have become poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he may be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.” (Leviticus 25:35, Webster Bible Translation). About this verse, Rashi wrote “thou shalt relieve him – do not allow him to fall further until it is too difficult to prop him back up; instead assist him from the moment he must reach out for help. What does this resemble? A load on a donkey: for as long as it remains on the donkey a single person can grab it and prevent it from falling, but once it has fallen to the ground – even five people cannot prop it back up.”

This commentary epitomizes the central role of philanthropy in the realm of welfare activities; it is designed to enable individuals to gain financial independence, a prerequisite for all individual needs – spiritual and material, personal and social, emotional and physical. As Rashi notes, the earlier the assistance is provided the fewer the resources are required and the better the results. This is the standard by which welfare philanthropy is evaluated: does it increase or decrease dependency? Philanthropy which increases dependency is more harmful than helpful, irrespective of its genuine intentions. As King Solomon says: “There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt” (Ecclesiastes 5:12, JPS Tanakh 1917). This is the case when the needy does not benefit from the assistance but rather is harmed by it.

The Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel boasts a long-standing tradition of large-scale philanthropic activities. However, a more in-depth examination reveals that much of these activities do not place members of the community on the path to financial independence and often may even increase dependence on donations, welfare stipends and government programs. The extent of funds funneled toward the Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel is very sizable, and we attempt to characterize its main areas of utilization nowadays and also to suggest other possibilities.

### Key Areas of Operations of Traditional Philanthropy

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Bezalel Cohen is Head of 'Hachmey Lev' Yeshiva of the Association for Advancing of Education, a graduate of the Mandel School for Educational Leadership and a social entrepreneur in the area of Ultra-Orthodox employment.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Ibenboim is founder and leader of 'movilot'- a training program for leadership at work - and heads the Ultra-Orthodox Section at Shoham Institute.

- **Torah study** – Dedicated scholars of Torah form the spiritual and ideological underpinning of the Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel. For over seventy years they have taken upon themselves the goal of reestablishing the world of Torah scholarship after its destruction and of increasing study among Israelis of every denomination.

The Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel currently boasts hundreds of yeshivas and kollels, academies of learning which house tens of thousands of professional Torah scholars and students. In addition to government funds and tuition paid by the parents of yeshiva students, institution heads are continuously under pressure to fundraise large sums. It would not be possible to cover ongoing maintenance costs without a constant flow of donations from Torah-loving philanthropists throughout the Jewish world.

Alongside yeshivas and kollels, there are also publishing institutes dedicated to publishing and distributing editions of quality rabbinic literature in all areas of thought, including *halacha*, *aggada*, ethics (*musar*), theology (*machshava*) and philosophy. Additionally, there are organizations which specialize in the establishment of Torah classes and Jewish ethics lessons throughout the country. These too depend heavily on philanthropic support.

- **Education** – Among the educational institutions which depend on philanthropic support in the Ultra-Orthodox community are elementary through secondary schools. These schools, always all-boys and all-girls schools, depend on donor support to provide the very best educational and spiritual content and the best physical conditions.

Because Ultra-Orthodox teens exhibit exceptionally high high-school dropout rates, there are now dozens of educational institutions specifically designed to address their needs and to provide life skills and professional skills. Intervention aimed at high school dropouts demands large budgets beyond the extensive support offered by the relevant government offices, which is why so often philanthropic support is sought.

- **Increasing religious observance** – In its efforts to bring the secular and traditional population in Israel closer to religion and religious observance, the Ultra-Orthodox community takes multiple actions. Many “*keruv*” organizations offer classes, lectures, workshops and group study opportunities, and yeshivas schools (*midrashot*) specifically targeting the newly observant – all for the shared goal of spreading the word of God. All of these efforts depend on the support of philanthropists who rally behind this cause.

- **Building funds for synagogues and *batei midrash*** - Thousands of synagogues and houses of study operate in Ultra-Orthodox centers throughout Israel, the construction of which required sizable capital which greatly exceeds government, municipal and congregation funds. These were all built owing to the generous support of Torah-loving donors.

- **Welfare and charity** – The high level of solidarity found among the Ultra-Orthodox community, coupled with the miserable conditions and poverty that afflict many Ultra-Orthodox families, have led to the establishment of hundreds of nonprofits and charity organizations which offer cash handouts, food donations, clothing and other assistance to needy families year-round,

and most particularly around the holidays. Some of their operating budgets are funded by the general public, but here too, there is great support from wealthy donors whose compassion and generosity is unlocked against such great human difficulties.

- **Assistance for the sick and handicapped** – Charity organizations which were originally established within the Ultra-Orthodox community now serve the general Israeli population and are a symbol of kind, unchecked generosity offered during the most trying times to those who are ill and their families. These organizations operate very impressive volunteer societies that offer medical equipment rentals, distribute meals at hospitals and more. These activities require financial support beyond government funds.
- **First aid and *hatzala*** – the Ultra-Orthodox community has volunteer organizations that make themselves available 24/7 to provide first aid assistance in cases of car accidents, terrorist attacks or any other case of disaster. These organizations depend on support for their everyday operations.

Traditional philanthropy has been clearly shown to provide pinpointed assistance directed at specific needs, which the Ultra-Orthodox community is not equipped to address independently. Nevertheless, despite large-scale donations, not only has the financial situation of the Ultra-Orthodox community not improved but also it has progressively faltered.

### **New Areas of Philanthropic Activity**

- **Professional training and/or academic degrees** – In the past twenty years (starting in 1996) awareness has grown for the need to create special programs for professional and academic training for members of the Ultra-Orthodox community. Additionally, it has become clear that most Ultra-Orthodox young adults require financial support to help them fund professional and/or academic education. In cooperation with government and philanthropic organizations, several institutions and programs have been established which provide financial support for thousands of Ultra-Orthodox students on their path to acquiring a profession or an academic degree.
- **Job placement** – Relatively low participation rates of the Ultra-Orthodox community in the workforce and the financial distress that many families experience, have spawned the creation of several programs aimed at increasing workforce participation in the Ultra-Orthodox community. These programs increase access to information about the work world, provide workforce skills and provide an interface to link Ultra-Orthodox jobseekers with potential employers. These activities are a joint collaboration between government offices and the nonprofit sector.
- **Hi-tech entrepreneurship** – Previous years have seen an effort to encourage hi-tech entrepreneurs from the Ultra-Orthodox community to join Israel's great success in that field. These efforts are supported by philanthropic entities.
- **Personal Financial Training** – In the last decade, awareness has increased for the need to instruct Ultra-Orthodox business entrepreneurs and household heads in the principles of financial

planning to prevent future debt and financial bankruptcy of the family or the business. Several organizations cover this area.

- **Leadership** – In the past five years (since 2010), a unique program has been operating in Israel dedicated to promoting the development of internal Ultra-Orthodox leadership with the long-range vision necessary for systematically tackling the challenges that the Ultra-Orthodox community faces. This work is funded by visionary donors who believe in the power of internal quality leadership to face the challenges of the times.

These new activities are united by their focus on empowering the Ultra-Orthodox community from within for the sake of improving its economic and social situation so as to enable it to face challenges on its own. At this stage, it appears that these activities are still limited and supported by a small group of philanthropic agents. Clearly, as these philanthropic activities increase, they will lessen the burden on more traditional forms of philanthropy.

### **Additional options for philanthropic action**

- **Education** – The normative educational model for Ultra-Orthodox boys is mainly geared toward raising Torah scholars and does not provide the skills necessary for its graduates to join the workforce and earn a living wage. The much-welcomed activities in the realm of professional training and postsecondary education among Ultra-Orthodox adults are often too late or too limited to be of benefit. The development of alternative educational models for providing a general education to Ultra-Orthodox youth can greatly improve the employment opportunities of many Ultra-Orthodox young adults and allow them to find better quality and higher paying jobs. All-girls schools in the Ultra-Orthodox community could also run programs that would offer their graduates better starting conditions when they enter the workforce.

- **Media** – Ultra-Orthodox media includes daily and weekly newspapers, radio stations and news sites. There are differences among the various media channels in their willingness to discuss certain topics openly, but they all share a high commitment to upholding the Ultra-Orthodox consensus and to avoiding novel or critical positions. Larger changes affecting the Ultra-Orthodox community in various areas deserve an adequate discussion in both print and online media, featuring open discussion and representing the full spectrum of positions found in the Ultra-Orthodox community.

- **Increasing awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and road safety**– educating the public at all age ranges about the importance of preserving health and avoiding risks can often prevent injury. Public health campaigns aimed at increasing awareness to keeping a healthy diet, exercise, keeping up with medical exams, exercising caution on the road, avoiding smoking, etc. take place in schools and among the adult population and prevent many unnecessary tragedies.

- **Research, planning and policy** – There are major data gaps in our knowledge of the Ultra-Orthodox community and this fact makes it difficult for its own leadership as well as government

agencies to calculate decisions. Systematic and organized data collection, quantitative and qualitative research, and the preparation of policy papers would greatly benefit the Ultra-Orthodox community and the State of Israel as a whole.

The activities mentioned here are only some of the possible avenues for action for empowering the Ultra-Orthodox community as an independent community that assumes responsibility for addressing the challenges it faces in its own unique way.

### **Guiding principles for philanthropic activity in the Ultra-Orthodox community**

Philanthropic activities within the Ultra-Orthodox community, particularly when non-Ultra-Orthodox actors are involved, demand a high degree of sensitivity and caution; therefore we wish to propose a few important guidelines:

- **Mutual respect and consideration** – Ultra-Orthodox lifestyle is rooted in a structured rabbinic and ideological worldview and a deep religious-historical consciousness. During the past 200 years, this lifestyle has needed to reassert itself against multiple ideological Jewish movements that have threatened its existence. Therefore, the motives behind any activities within the Ultra-Orthodox community sponsored by external sources are met with heavy suspicion. Those who wish to run programs in the Ultra-Orthodox community must avoid a patronizing or missionary approach. They must ensure that they have the proper respect and appreciation and they must sincerely and openly present their worldviews and motives. They must foster mutual respect as a preliminary condition for any further activities.
- **Identify Ultra-Orthodox partners** – Because any program in the Ultra-Orthodox community requires the participation of community members, it is important to identify willing partners within the community. Such partners do not need to be associated with Ultra-Orthodox rabbinic or social leadership but they must strongly identify as Ultra-Orthodox socially and ideologically.
- **Address fears** – Every novelty in the Ultra-Orthodox community is anxiously greeted with fears as to its unknown effects on the Ultra-Orthodox way of life and worldview. These fears must be genuinely addressed and never dismissed or minimized.
- **Learning by trial and error** – The Ultra-Orthodox community has many unique cultural aspects that are unknown to outsiders. Any program to be implemented in the Ultra-Orthodox community must be accompanied by an ongoing learning process to continuously increase social and cultural fluency regarding Ultra-Orthodox social makeup, cultural codes, central values, power centers, etc. Every program should be followed up by an evaluation to draw conclusions from successes and failures. Rapid comprehensive programs should be avoided in favor of incremental and patient moves.
- **Philanthropy as a Social Start-Up** – Despite its paramount importance for Israel as a whole, the country still struggles to implement much needed programs to achieve social and economic stability among the Ultra-Orthodox community. Philanthropy should thus step forward and guide the country on the correct path, following a process of trial and error, research and evaluation.

“And Moses blessed them” (Exodus 39:43) - Rashi explains this verse as follows: “He said to them: May God’s *shechinah* dwell in your handiwork, ‘and let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yes, the work of our hands establish thou it’ (Psalms 90:17, Webster’s Bible Translation).” May we see success in our endeavors.