

Public Charedi Libraries in Israel / Moshe Chiam Leiter

Abstract

This study dealt with ultra-Orthodox public libraries in the State of Israel - a relatively new phenomenon in the world of public libraries. This research dealt with various aspects of these libraries. This research is divided into two main topics: characteristics of ultra-Orthodox libraries, i.e. what distinguishes public ultra-Orthodox libraries from other public libraries. The second topic: the collection of the ultra-orthodox library - what are the principles of the development and screening of this library's collection.

The ultra-orthodox public maintains its own unique lifestyle based on the pious observance of Jewish law and the tradition of the ancestors. This society distances themselves from modern western culture and especially the values of the secular society in the State of Israel in order not to be influenced by the secular way of life, many of whose values and culture stand in stark contrast to the values and lifestyle of the ultra-orthodox society. Following the conduct of the ultra-Orthodox public in separate frameworks in education and society in order to maintain its uniqueness and separatism, a need arose for the creation of ultra-Orthodox literature based on the values of this society, which stands on its own ground, and the establishment of ultra-Orthodox libraries that will contain this literature and provide service to the ultra-Orthodox society in order to satisfy the cultural needs of this society from within itself and in accordance with its values . As a preliminary step, the research deals with the historical development of ultra-Orthodox literature, with an emphasis on literature for children and youth, what are its characteristics and goals, why it was created, how does it differ from general literature and show the development of this literature up to the present day. This preliminary research leads to an understanding of the emergence of ultra-Orthodox libraries which contain this literature. It should be noted that this is a relatively new phenomenon, which has developed in recent generations, approximately one hundred and twenty years old.

Haredi literature was created as a result of the flourishing of secular literature for youth, which was created at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe. Part of the goals of this literature was

a leisure culture that developed with the Enlightenment period and onward, and another goal was to be a tool in the hands of various movements to instill ideologies in the younger generation and mobilize them for their goals. Indeed, this literature had a huge influence on the youth and swept the various movements. The 'trauma of the drift' as it is called by various researchers, laid the foundation for the separation policy of the ultra-Orthodox sector, due to the fact that many of the sons of ultra-orthodox Judaism abandoned religion during this period, and the values of the family and community on which they grew up, under the influence of the ideas preached by secular literature on their ideas during this period.

As a response against the influence of this literature, some of the leaders of ultra-Orthodox Judaism at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the First World War, who saw the weakening of the communities, agreed and even supported the creation of alternative ultra-Orthodox literature in order to offer a solution to the youth's desire to for literature. The slogan of the creators of ultra-Orthodox literature was "through literature we were smitten and through literature we will be healed". Leaders of ultra-Orthodox Judaism such as Rabbi of the Hasidic dynasty of Ger gave their hand to the creation of this literature and even allowed the establishment of ultra-Orthodox libraries under certain conditions. Not all the rabbis at that time and even afterwards saw favorably these initiatives of creating ultra-Orthodox literature and establishing ultra-Orthodox libraries because of wasting time that could be spent on Torah study (and the fear that improper books would enter these libraries unintentionally). However, reality and necessity overcame the opposition and excellent ultra-Orthodox writers appeared one after another and created excellent ultra-Orthodox literature that was capable of competing with secular literature. The initial push for the creation of ultra-Orthodox literature and the establishment of ultra-Orthodox libraries was in the hands of the youth movements that belonged to Agudat Israel, and most of the writers came from this movement. Most of this literature was didactic and was designed with the goal of mobilizing the ultra-orthodox youth to be loyal to their heritage and continue the chain of generations. This literature was indeed successful to some extent in stopping the drift of ultra-orthodox youth into the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment) and non-religious movements.

World War II ended the development of ultra-Orthodox literature, since most of its authors perished in the Holocaust. In addition, the ultra-orthodox libraries ceased to exist and were destroyed. Only in the sixties of the twentieth century did a change occur and the writing of ultra-orthodox literature adapted to the Israeli religious youth began to develop. At first this was done in slow steps and the results was not always satisfactory enough, but over time the ultra-orthodox literature improved in quality and quantity. A new generation of talented, educated and eloquent writers produced an excellent yield, ultra-Orthodox bookstores were opened and ultra-Orthodox publishers were established.

During this period, there were no ultra-Orthodox public libraries yet, and those looking for ultra-Orthodox literature had to go to the public library, which contained books of all kinds, which exposed the youth again to unsuitable literature. In addition, there were private libraries in homes but this provided only a partial response to the public due to operational problems and space limitations.

Only in the mid-1980s with the appearance of new ultra-Orthodox settlements were the first libraries established. Towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the process of establishing ultra-Orthodox libraries accelerated and libraries were founded one after another; Some of them were housed in spacious and beautiful buildings with a huge amount of ultra-Orthodox literature of all kinds. As of 2022, most ultra-Orthodox communities, even those located in distinctly secular cities, have ultra-Orthodox libraries. At the time of this research, about thirty ultra-orthodox libraries were located throughout the country, and the trend continues to develop. The libraries contain diverse genres: biographies of rabbis and great personalities, stories, poems, comics, and more. Despite the fact that from the outset ultra-Orthodox literature started as didactic literature, this literature continues to develop all the time and is able to deal with sensitive issues that were previously not acceptable to write about, such as family problems and dilemmas that preoccupy ultra-Orthodox society, and more.

As part of this research, nine ultra-Orthodox public libraries were investigated with the help of in-depth interviews with the managers of these libraries, and 12 parents - the library's subscribers - were also interviewed to understand more about the unique ultra-Orthodox nature of the library

and those who visit the library. The research also included visits and observations in the library area and a review of the library's collections and its regulations.

The first issue that the research dealt with is the issue of the characteristics of the ultra-orthodox library: in this area, the main characteristics of the ultra-orthodox library that stood out, were, the separation of the sexes by separate hours for boys and girls and ultra-orthodox staff from among the community. The role of the ultra-Orthodox library in the ultra-Orthodox community is also perceived differently from the role of a library in the general public. Since reading is considered one of the most common leisure activities in this society. Beyond the technical aspects and the functions of the ultra-orthodox library, it differs from general libraries in the composition of its collection. The characteristics of the collections of these libraries are discussed in the second part of the study.

The research findings pointed to unique characteristics of the ultra-orthodox library. Its founding and establishment as well as its professional activity's is similar to other public libraries operating in the State of Israel and receive the assistance of both governmental and municipal bodies. At the same time, it is characterized by a staff that is usually all ultra-Orthodox, and the subscriber profile also mostly belongs to this company. In these libraries there is almost always gender segregation and there are separate reception days and hours for women and men. Another significant feature is a strict screening of the collection in the library; There is a complete set of criteria for including a book in the library's collection, and it must contain sensitivity to the writing topics, to the images, to facts that will not contradict the main tenants of faith, and even attention is given to the writing style. Sometimes there is reliance on "haskama" – approbation or approval - a common phenomenon in Torah literature, in which a Torah personality or an authorized body gives consent to the contents of the book. Due to the high sensitivity that the ultra-orthodox public exhibits in regards to exposure to various contents, there should be a relationship of trust between the subscribing public and the library staff. These interactions are the foundation stone for the library's survival and existence. Indeed, in practice the subscribers feel involved and also allow themselves to appeal from time to time to the library staff about content that is defective in their eyes and requires censoring, or the removal of the book from the collection. The collection itself is sorted by age, and books designated for adults only will not be

lent to young people without their parents' permission. In addition to that, every library has a reserved space, a closed cabinet, etc. near the bookcases where there are books that contain content related to topics that are not discussed in public in the ultra-orthodox circles, such as: pregnancy and childbirth, marriage counseling and also content such as difficult tragedies and more. These books are lent out in principle "for married people only" (a name given for the purpose of definition since even mature unmarried individuals will be able to borrow them). Another important thing to note is the fact that most libraries are not connected to the Internet, although some of them provide computer services and browsing in digital databases. With the exception of one researched library, all the other libraries have no website and no catalog available to the public online.

Both the library staff and the subscribers presented a outlook according to which the ultra-orthodox library is much more than a place to borrow books, in their eyes the library serves as a source of learning, i.e., locating information, assistance in writing papers, and more, as well as a cultural center that provides enrichment activities for all ages in many different fields. The principle that runs as the common thread in all the roles described is that all activity is carried out in a sacred and pure form and that the subscribers have great trust in the library staff and its conduct.

The staff of the ultra-Orthodox library is usually a team imbued with a purpose and a sense of mission. As in most libraries in Israel and around the world, it is made up mostly of women. On the one hand, the ultra-orthodox librarians feel great satisfaction in their ability to meet the needs of the community and provide advanced services adapted to society's values and the educational role that the library represents. On the other hand, their location allows them to open a window to community members' subscriptions, to technological innovations, to external information, to the rules of conduct in the public space - tools that give them unique power and partnership in the development of the community. It seems that the dialogue between these two poles constitutes one of the challenges of the ultra-orthodox library nowadays as it provides a service to a conservative society that is undergoing change.

The findings of the present study contribute to the theoretical knowledge about libraries that serve minority groups, and the relationship between a community and a library. On a practical

level, this study may provide tools for local authorities or entrepreneurs who wish to open and develop such libraries in Israel and around the world.

The recommendations of the research on the practical side is to create collaborations between the ultra-orthodox libraries in order to help them develop and respond to the changing needs of the ultra-orthodox community.

Since the research was conducted on only nine libraries, there is room for further comparative research with additional libraries, and with a focus on the unique features between different types of libraries such as small versus large, those under ultra-Orthodox authorities and those that serve the ultra-Orthodox public in mixed cities, and more.

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