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LIFESTYLE



HAREDIM ON a Mea Shearim street corner during Sukkot. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

Getting more aggressive in helping haredim leave the fold

• By PEGGY CIDOR

A radio advertisement for Hillel, an association that provides assistance to haredim who wish to leave the haredi community, was disqualified from broadcasting by the Second Television and Radio Authority in July, on the grounds that it violated the authority's directive not to offend the ultra-Orthodox public. The broadcast included testimony from three former haredi youths who found help and support from the association when they decided to leave their community,

Hillel has appealed the decision and on October 26, the High Court will have to rule on the matter.

Considering the large number of documentaries and news reports broadcast on the various channels of the Second TV and Radio Authority that are not particularly favorable to the ultra-Orthodox, this banning doesn't seem consistent. Sources have suggested that the reason may be a change in Hillel's policy – from a seemingly neutral position of helping only those who exited the community to one that appears to be becoming an outreach organization.

The credo of Hillel from the beginning has always been that only those over the age of 18, who have already decided to leave the haredi society are eligible for the support of the association. Officially, nothing has changed, and to this day, the first questions callers

to the Hillel Hotline are asked is their age and whether their decision to embark on a new path was made freely. However, among some haredi circles, the word is that Hillel is becoming more an activist organization rather than simply waiting for *yotzim* to contact them.

THE HILLEL organization is 20 years old. In the fall of 1991, 17-year-old Shai Horowitz appeared on TV in prime time and moved millions of spectators as he revealed his personal story as a young haredi who lost his faith and decided to move out of his community. The hardships awaiting any haredi who would take that step were until then known to few, but Horowitz's testimony aroused a lot of interest. When he mentioned that he wanted to create an organization to help those who, like him, wished to leave the haredi sector, a group of men and women from various backgrounds showed up and decided to help, including Arnon Yekutieli, a member of the Meretz list in the Jerusalem municipality, who provided significant assistance.

Thus, the Hillel nonprofit was born. About six months after founding the association, Horowitz returned to the haredi community and even founded Manof – the Jewish Information Center – whose goal was to combat the phenomenon of haredim questioning their way of life.

Originally based almost exclusively on hundreds of volunteers who do not receive a salary, today Hillel has become a large association with a professional staff

addressing a wide range of topics, with growing support from the general public. Hillel continued to be completely volunteer run until 2013 and Yair Hass, the current director, himself a *yotzeh*, began as a volunteer in 2007. Today, Hillel has four centers nationwide, transitional housing units in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, a residential emergency shelter facility, and 32 paid staff – primarily social workers. Hillel provides a series of services – from the “hotline” for the first step of contact through advocacy and support and training for the *yotzim* (the Hebrew term for those who “come out” of the haredi sector) through supplying of basic needs such as clothing, computers, cooking utensils, books and household items.

Most of the applicants to the association are young people in their 20s, about 75% boys and about 25% girls and the number of people “in question” who are in contact with the association is around 250-300. According to the association's figures, new member intake has grown annually by an average of 22% over the past five years.

On a phone conversation earlier this week, Yair Hass admits that the tone of the group has changed a bit, but adds that the policy hasn't budged an inch.

“There is a constant rise in the numbers of young haredim who decide to leave their prior way of life. It doesn't matter at what age or in which circumstances that occurs – it is always a great crisis. I know it; I've been there myself.”



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HILLEL'S YAIR Hess: The damage caused by the rigid haredi lifestyle required more activism. (Nati Eisencott)

At Hillel, the understanding is that things have reached a point where being nice and gentle is not enough anymore.

"The damage caused by the rigid haredi lifestyle required more activism," explains Hass. "Young people are deprived of their right for education, for professional training that will enable them to earn a livelihood and so on. We had to react. These banned broadcasts simply brought to the attention of the public the reality behind the official title – we had to go public with it. We didn't say anything rude about the haredi sector, we just brought testimonies, with their own voices, of those who couldn't go on anymore inside that system."

The appeal to the High Court was, Hass points out, the right thing to do, and he mentioned that it could be done only thanks to pro-bono work done by Adv. Yossi Abadi.

THE PROBLEMS encountered by people who decide to leave the haredi society are significant.

"No one can overcome that without support and help, and the process takes time," says Hass. Loneliness is only one of these difficulties, but sometimes it can lead to tragic consequences – with a constant number of suicides and suicide attempts. But even without that dramatic phenomenon, the life of yotzim is hard and sad – much more than just adapting to an unknown society and overcoming longing for a family that in most of the cases will abruptly cut any contact. Issues of lost faith and the need to fill the void caused by it are deep, and no association or support can bridge that abyss.

But in parallel, the life of those who have lost that faith, but for various reasons do not dare to leave the community is also not easy. On the surface these persons look and act like "business as usual," but under the cover of their regular life is a terrible solitude. But for those, even Hillel is not an address.

Lately there have been several documentaries and reports in the media about those, whom some call *anusim* (like the Maranos during the period of the Inquisition) which, according to haredi sources, have caused some concern that associations like Hillel might "use" them for their campaigns to attract more potential yotzim.

"One of the things that most worries the haredi spiritual leadership is those who live inside the community but are largely already not with us anymore, says a haredi whose brother left the society some 10 years ago.

"I am in contact with my brother, but the family doesn't know about it, otherwise I would be in trouble also," he explains. "I have not lost my faith, despite some criticism I have toward my sector, but in most cases, a haredi who leaves the society loses everything. My brother left behind a wife and two children, but I decided not to judge him. I keep in contact with him, secretly of course."

One key difficulty encountered by *yotzim* beyond the separation from the family, is the feeling of total alienation from the secular world. Despite concern for the basic needs to make a living, they have practically no marketable skills to integrate with the world outside. Interestingly, the coronavirus crisis has opened tiny portals, since it allowed, in many circles, the open use of the Internet. Now worries among the haredi leadership about the more activist approach of Hillel are adding to the more sensitive atmosphere in the community.