

# Making Israel Work

## Editorial

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**Part two of a series on poverty in Israel; to read part one, click [here](#).**

Ephraim Guttman illustrates both the face of poverty in Israel and a solution. Dressed in the uniform of the ultra-Orthodox — the requisite black suit and white shirt, which makes no concession to the scorching summer heat — he does not appear destitute in the classic sense. But like most men in his community, he was utterly unprepared for the modern workplace when he married two years ago at 18, with only a rudimentary education beyond the religious curriculum of a Jerusalem yeshiva.

While Israel is eagerly joining the elite club of developed nations, and luxury buildings rise above the modest Bauhaus landscape that once defined Tel Aviv, and while stock offerings and real estate prices and the number of start-ups continue to soar, economic and social inequalities are growing, too, threatening the Jewish state's civic fabric and its ability to prosper and defend itself. No longer a nation of struggling immigrants and refugees, Israel's economic challenges are driven by the persistent *non*-employment in two key populations, Arab Israelis and Haredi men like Guttman.

That these two groups share a sort of ignoble bond is a deep irony of Israeli society. Their structural poverty is caused or enabled by long-standing government policy: By subsidizing Haredi men who study instead of work, and exempting them from military service, successive Israeli governments have created huge incentives toward non-employment that are only now beginning to be dismantled. Meanwhile, the gross public disinvestment in Arab communities has left those residents nearly four times more likely than their Jewish counterparts to live in poverty.

But, interestingly, creative grassroots efforts to address these problems also have much in common. “The culture of dependency cuts across populations, and they all face discrimination in the workplace,” says Chaviva Eisler, who oversees an employment center supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Jerusalem. “So you have to work with the population you are serving to build interventions that are culturally and religiously appropriate.”

Eisler comes from the Orthodox world herself, and she has seen the evolution from, in her words, “a society of earners to a society of learners.” It was not always so in Israel, and still isn't the case in many communities around the world. A recent study found that only 18% of Haredi men in London sit in yeshiva all day, compared to about 67% in Israel. Why? British welfare policy encourages work. Traditional Jewish education there includes nonreligious studies. And there is no mandatory military service to flee, so entering the work force is more palatable.

So Eisler's center, Maftach, has much to overcome. Since the ultra-Orthodox in Israel don't feel comfortable using government employment centers, Maftach deliberately acknowledges the Haredi lifestyle: Men and women are trained separately, and clients are placed in jobs with a

*shomer* Shabbat schedule. The staff works closely with rabbinic leadership, encouraging them to support men working outside the home. Dignity is at stake here, and social status. Guttman consulted with his *rav* before taking a job in a matzo factory, and then another job managing a produce market; the young man was told he could work as long as he studied one hour every day.

There are many obstacles placed before Arabs seeking to enter the Israeli workforce — poor skills from under-resourced education; lack of access to jobs; pure discrimination — but culture is also an impediment, particularly for women. “We try to convince husbands to let their wives out of their homes,” explains Mohammed Namneh, project director in the JDC’s Tevet employment initiative in Jerusalem. His program employs a kind of gentle peer pressure, with group discussions for reluctant husbands, and visits from those men who have already made the leap. Women must be assuaged, as well: “We tell the women, ‘You don’t have to take your scarf off to do this job.’ We don’t go against the cultural taboos, never.”

And, much like Eisler’s attempts to utilize rabbinic leadership, Namneh strives to convince imams to talk about shared responsibility in the home and the Islamic tradition that considers work a kind of worship. “We focus on work as a value, work as something that can improve the family situation,” he says. “And once they see the first salary, they get satisfied.”

Clearly, grassroots interventions alone will not satisfactorily address this problem. When the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that poverty in Israel is more widespread than in any of the 30 nations in this elite global club, it noted that “tackling the causes of such entrenched and wide inequalities as exist in Israel will not be easy. It will require a sustained effort across a broad range of policy areas.” Among them: better enforcement of labor laws and anti-discrimination policies, and serious investment in education and welfare-to-work programs.

But government policy in any democracy depends in part on the will of the people. The Haredi and Arab communities in Israel are too often isolated as the “other” by a largely secular society with little patience for the stringencies of ultra-Orthodoxy, and by a largely Jewish citizenry with little sympathy for the Arabs in its midst. And yet these two substantial, growing minorities may hold the key to Israel’s economic future.

As Haaretz columnist Aluf Benn noted recently: “If Israel managed to reach its current standard of living without them, one can only imagine where we could go with the added talent and motivation that is not currently being tapped.... If we open our doors to them and give them opportunities, we will all benefit. And if we continue to shut ourselves off, we will all crash.”

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