

**AMY NEUSTEIN**

# Don't defend the educational failures of ultra-Orthodox schools

We should call for reforms,  
not make excuses.



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**(October 2, 2022 / JNS)** Last month, the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* ran a cover story above the fold reporting that there have been massive educational failures in the Haredi and Hasidic primary and secondary school systems. The story reported that students in ultra-Orthodox schools who took statewide exams on secular subjects had a 99% failure rate.

It also highlighted the more macabre side of educational institutions in insular communities. The story revealed that parents felt compelled to give “tips” of \$100 to each teacher at the beginning of the semester in order to ensure that the teachers would not strike their child with a ruler, slap them in the face, bang them on the head or worse.

Within hours of the story’s publication, nearly 3,500 reader comments flooded the *Times*’ digital platform. The paper published half-a-dozen letters to the editor on the issue. *NPR*’s Brian Lehrer devoted his entire show to the topic and the calls streamed in without pause. The *Times* story was picked up all over the country. In the New York area, it was the lead story in print and broadcast media for over a week.

The consensus in the press was that the failure to provide a secular education to yeshiva students is tragic, because it leaves these students wholly unprepared for the world they will someday have to face. Reader reactions ranged from profound sorrow at the fate of the

students to anger at New York politicians for allowing such violations of state curriculum standards.

If you opened up a Jewish paper or listened to a Sabbath sermon in the wake of the *Times* story, however, you would think that you had landed on another planet. Aside from *The Forward*, which was one of the first papers to highlight religious schools' colossal failure to teach secular studies, the Jewish media was rife with diatribe after diatribe condemning the *Times*' supposed "hit job."

Community leaders speaking on radio and podcasts urged parents to beware of the State Board of Regents, which they described as a fearful bureaucracy that will grow "bigger and bigger" with time until schools are swamped by its officials. This is undoubtedly frightening to a community living with memories of the Holocaust and the murderous bureaucracy that carried it out.

After the Board of Regents unanimously voted to approve rules forcing yeshivas to prove they are offering basic secular instruction, Yiddish papers broadcast religious leaders' call for a "fast" to lift the supposedly evil "decree." The tradition of fasting to lift a decree began in ancient times when Jews were subjugated by oppressive non-Jewish governments. The Board of Regents, in other words, was portrayed as a mortal threat to the Jewish community.

Regrettably, such extreme reactions are not confined to the ultra-Orthodox community. In Young Israel shuls and public statements by the Orthodox Union, two respected organizations at the helm of Modern Orthodoxy today, there was vociferous opposition to state regulation of secular studies in yeshivas.

Orthodox Union Executive Vice President Rabbi Moshe Hauer stated: "We are very concerned that these regulations will lead to constant conflict between government and the religious community, and compromise an educational system." A prominent Young Israel rabbi, in his Sabbath morning sermon, likened the *Times* exposé to the hateful assault on the Jewish people described in the weekly parsha.

This whitewash of prominent religious organizations' failure to properly educate their students is quite disturbing. Has anyone taken note of the federal prosecutions of fraudulent school programs over the last few decades? Such prosecutions have revealed that members of certain religious communities who cannot sustain themselves in the job market due to inadequate education are easily tempted by fraud schemes that promise to help them survive financially.

Unfortunately, some otherwise illustrious and honorable people have fallen into this trap. For example, the *Times* reported in 1999 that Rabbi Hertz Frankel, an official Satmar spokesperson and founder of the Ohel Children's Home and Family Services, was convicted of having

“conspired to place dozens of Hasidic housewives in no-show jobs at the district payroll.” When confronted by federal prosecutors, Frankel tried to dismiss his elaborate fraud scheme as “an acceptable—albeit under-the-table—private school voucher program.” This didn’t persuade the prosecutors, and the rabbi subsequently pled guilty.

Rabbi Dr. Shaul Magid, professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College and Kogod senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartmann Institute of North America, wrote last month of the *Times*’ story, “What almost none of the article’s critics appears to mention is that this story is really about corruption; it’s about the city and state political figures and yeshiva deans who have duplicitously taken money from state coffers without abiding by state regulations, and the politicians who’ve looked the other way to ensure a Haredi voting bloc. As much as a Hasidic story, this is also a New York story of political malfeasance.”

If Magid is correct, and there is little reason to believe otherwise, can the yeshivas keep dodging the bullet? How much longer will the government bankroll ultra-Orthodox educational facilities if they don’t comply with state regulations on basic curriculum standards? Moreover, in the current climate of rebellion, in which communities are asked to engage in a day-long fast so as to lift the “decree” of state regulation of secular education, can one truly expect parents, teachers and principals to comply with state education standards?

What is needed at this critical moment is for religious leaders and organizations to jettison their defensive posture. We must ask ourselves: Is it in the interests of the ultra-Orthodox community and its children to ignore the elephant in the room? Will students who have been denied a secular education be able to pass a CPA exam so that they can become an accountant? Will they be able to pass entrance exams to get into a good college and/or graduate school? Probably not. This does not augur well for the community.

We must recalibrate, reorganize and reconsider the broad ramifications of a failed secular education system. We need to speak openly about the cultural sensitivities of the ultra-Orthodox community. Fears of “assimilation” must be made part of the discourse rather than lurk in the background, where they are easily stoked by mass hysteria. Education reform in Hasidic and Haredi enclaves deserves no less. The time is now.

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