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Introduction: A Need for Change

A decade ago, as I watched Hasidic activists blatantly denying the reality about the lack of secular education that I've experienced, and which tens of thousands of children in Hasidic yeshivas across New York continue to face, I felt compelled to speak up, and I did. I penned essays, shared my story with media outlets, and lobbied policymakers in City Hall and Albany. While change in Hasidic education remains necessary, Yaffed's advocacy approach for improving yeshiva education also requires reevaluation. When I was recently offered to join Yaffed's board, I decided to take a step back to critically reflect on the past decade of controversy and progress.

My reflections—shaped by intimate knowledge of community affairs and hundreds of personal conversations with community members—led me to conclude that Yaffed's past actions have proven severely counterproductive. **Rather than leading to educational improvements, efforts to enforce regulations have engulfed the community into a sense of existential crisis and hardened leaders to resist change.** Media exposure intended to pressure government officials into enacting reform has largely failed and instead convinced community members that their way of life is under unfair attack, further solidifying the status quo. Yaffed being squarely blamed as the driving force for the community's antagonization, its infamy among Hasidim has grown too severe to rectify, rendering even reasonable good-faith collaboration efforts with community establishment impossible.

To allow reform, a recalibration of the issue is needed. Given goals of preserving the Hasidic community's unique traditional identity and pushing for realistic change, I argue that only comprehensive English literacy and numeracy should be demanded. Rudimentary English and mathematics are already being taught in nearly all Hasidic boys' middle schools, but increasing their rigor requires a shift in attitude rather than imposed external regulations. Hoping that government entities will enforce any further reform is wishful thinking, and further attempts to litigate the issue in courts, no matter the legal rulings, will likely exacerbate antagonistic attitudes without leading to improvements on the ground.

My recommendation is for Yaffed to cease all its current legal, media and messaging efforts, allowing the community to exit its existential battle mentality and enabling a path forward for potential progress elsewhere to materialize. I also highlight that unrelated but increasingly real fears of rising antisemitism now cloud much of Yaffed's efforts and are further reason for Yaffed to halt its actions.

The likelihood of existing Hasidic establishment schools improving secular education in the immediate future is dim, and only incentive-based approaches entirely untethered from Yaffed's involvement may prove successful. The best approach to improve educational realities in the

Hasidic community is by providing new resources outside establishment schools for those already seeking them. If done effectively, this will offer immediate tangible results improving conditions for Hasidic children, and most optimistically may be an eventual catalyst for systemic change.

Despite years of investigations, lawsuits, lobbying, millions spent, and front-page headlines, not a single Hasidic child has yet received a better education due to Yaffed's efforts. The system is failing, and the effort to fix it has been failing too. Driven by the same conviction to do the right thing and improve the wellbeing of my community I love, I am now speaking up, again.

גזירת החינוך - The Evil Education Decree

In the Hasidic world, the New York education controversy is colloquially and universally referred to as the "the education decree" ("גזירת החינוך"), a threatening "*gezerah*". The term "*gezerah*" in such a context holds a visceral and existential connotation, indicating an evil decree with the intent to render extinct Jews and/or Judaism. From a young age, the term was introduced when teaching the Biblical story of Pharaoh decreeing that all Jewish sons born to be cast into the Nile, the Chanukah story of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes outlawing Jewish practice and defiling the Temple, and the Purim story of Haman attempting to annihilate all the Jewish people. The term elicits references to the Spanish inquisition, the Khmelnytsky pogroms in 1648 ("גזירות ת"ח ות"ט"), and the contemporary "draft decree" ("גזירת הגיוס") in Israel where the government is attempting to draft Haredi men against their will. **For many Hasidim and Haredim generally, the education issue is no longer viewed as merely a political battle; it's been branded as a battle for their community's existence.**

With control over community news and publications, Hasidic leaders routinely set the tone and facts of the narrative. For the Hasid who only gets his news from sources like *Kol Mevasser*, the education controversy has been effectively painted as an affront by Yaffed to forcefully change their way of life. Such portrayals are not limited to the establishment-led newspapers like *Der Blatt* and *Der Yid*, but even in more "liberal" Hasidic publications like the *Moment Magazine*. In its recent Sukkos edition, for example, the *Moment's* Nafshi [cover article was normalizing Ketamine therapy](#), a bold boundary-pushing topic anywhere and certainly in the Hasidic community, and still its frequent coverage of the education controversy consistently toe the uncompromising line. Even non-Hasidic outlets like *Hamodia*, *Ami Magazine*, *Yeshiva World News*, and *Vos Iz Neias* frame educational reform efforts as a deliberate affront against their way of life.



Moment cover article from 2019 interviewing PEARL's lawyer Avi Schick, with bolded words "The Jewish people's fight."



Moment cover article when the regulations were weakened in May, 2025, with a triumphant "Annulled!" title

Yaffed's goal of improving basic educational standards has been successfully mischaracterized as an attempt to uproot *Yiddishkeit*. Community-wide gatherings to pray for redemption on this evil decree add to the sense of existential urgency. Rabble-rousing publications and inflammatory *gilyonos* brochures in synagogues further fan the flames.



Left: Example weekly *gilyon* brochure with alarming headline about Yaffed's efforts. "You will not defeat the Jewish nation! We will remain loyal to God and this holy Torah."

Right: Example posters in Williamsburg about a "Great Strengthening Rally" in a local hall "to rescue the pure education in the USA."

When I heard about the antisemitic Forshay stabbing attack at the home of Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg on Chanukkah 2019 I was mortified. The rabbi has been close with and helpful to my family, my brother frequented the *shul* where the stabbing occurred, and from personal interactions I've known him as a good man. When I [watched](#) him days later delivering an invocation at the Governor's State of the State address, I was dismayed to hear, "We pray that divine providence should continue protecting us from evil forces who are out to harm us

physically or from those who are out to attack our Hasidic traditional way of life and system of education." I viewed him as cynically using a tragedy to advance an unrelated cause. In truth, however, they are likely not as disparate in his mind. Both the heinous physical attack and the demands for educational reform are analogously viewed as potential existential threats, and many Hasidim share that perception.

Similar to how facing a physical threat legally empowers one to act in manners generally impermissible, a *gezerah* may necessitate *mesiras nefesh* ("מסירת נפש"). Translated as "giving over the soul", this cardinal principle of Judaism asserts the need for self-sacrifice for the sake of one's Jewish identity and faith, a willingness to prioritize the well-being of one's Jewish community above personal desires. Historical examples of *mesiras nefesh* for the sake of Torah education include Rabbi Akiva teaching Torah under Roman prohibition, secret Torah study by *Anusim* during the Spanish Inquisition, clandestine *cheders* in Soviet Russia, and study groups in ghettos and camps during the Holocaust. While these examples cannot be compared with the unmatched levels of tolerance and religious freedom in New York, they nevertheless highlight the measures many Hasidim will pursue should they believe that their way of life and education is under threat.

Last year, assemblyman Simcha Eichenstein, a Hasidic state representative from Borough Park credited with weakening the regulations this past legislative session, was given rabbinic permission to remain in Albany past the start of Shabbat to continue his advocacy. Such Shabbat desecration is only permissible if Jewish life is directly at risk. Its allowance demonstrates that belief among Hasidim about a real existential threat requiring unprecedented measures is not mere speculation.

When the Satmar Rebbe [proclaims](#) "We will not comply, and we will not follow the state education commissioner under any circumstances," this is no longer mere empty rhetoric. He is stating what has become a de facto reality. Once this issue has become successfully ingrained as an existential threat requiring extreme resistance in the minds of sufficiently many Hasidim, it has turned into a fight for community survival. **When Hasidim hold signs "WE WILL SIT IN JAIL RATHER THAN CHANGE OUR CHILDRENS EDUCATION", don't assume it's**

mere theatrics. "For they are a stiffnecked people - כי עם קשה עורף הוא," the Torah describes the Jewish people more than once. When dealing with a supposed existential threat, with a threatening *gezerah*, any suggestion for progress stemming from a perceived enemy, no matter how nuanced or good-faith, will be immediately shut down by leadership or risk perception of conceding to the other side.



Yaffed's Sullied Reputation

Yaffed was never popular in the Hasidic community, and the level of distrust and anger Yaffed now raises among a majority of Hasidim is palpable. Many in the Hasidic community view themselves as being unfairly targeted and maligned in media and government, and Yaffed is often pinned as the singular impetus behind that. Advocates associated with Yaffed are grouped with noted antisemitic characters and villains of Jewish history. Yaffed is directly blamed by many Hasidim for inflicting the existential threat facing the community, driving negative media coverage that increases antisemitism, and for the government singling out the community for misdeeds.

The sense that the community is being unfairly singled out for persecution was severely exacerbated by the [September 2022 NY Times exposé](#), with Yaffed playing a key role in its publication. (Disclosure: I am featured in the article.) The immediate and palpable negative reaction to the article across the larger Jewish communities and [far beyond](#) was much fiercer than I could have anticipated. In retrospect, seeing the strong negative reaction even outside of Hasidic circles, the article was a mistake. While it certainly raised awareness and likely [helped pass legislation at the time](#), it further reinforced the notion in the ultra-Orthodox world that the fight over educational standards is not a fight for merely that, but a fight for their overall way of life. The barrage of other negative articles from the Times aimed at the community over the following weeks certainly did not help matters, and Hasidim largely blame Yaffed for what they perceive has been an attempt to malign them at the global scale.

These negative views among Hasidim matter because as the community leaders proclaim to wage a fight for its continued existence, Yaffed has become the target to fight against. In other words, implementing any change advocated by Yaffed is viewed as conceding to the enemy. Even actions that could presumably benefit the community but can be seen as caving to Yaffed's demands are no longer viable. Yaffed is the devil, and at no cost do you make a deal with the devil or conform with the devil's wants. This knee-jerk reaction to eschew anything propelled by Yaffed extends to any regulation or government programs spurred on by Yaffed's advocacy.

Anecdotally, Yaffed's favorability has also tanked among the formerly Hasidic. Additionally, I've increasingly heard the sentiment even among non-Hasidim in my expansive social circle that Yaffed's efforts have to date not succeeded in improving educational standards in Hasidic schools but have led to otherwise unhelpful negative portrayals of the Hasidic community. Indeed, to date there has been no tangible change to the subjects, rigor, or duration of secular studies taught in any Hasidic school since Yaffed's inception in 2012. Some have also pointed out that Yaffed was started as a grassroots movement of people raised within the Hasidic community and personally affected by the lack of education, but its current leadership and board no longer reflect that.

Its negative reputation was solidified under previous Yaffed leadership, and strategy shifts since have taken a more measured approach to account for community sensibilities. But once a

negative reputation is solidified, changing it is difficult, especially when agitators are actively working to reinforce it. I've known the current leadership at Yaffed for some time, and they've demonstrated a true care for maintaining the Hasidic community's core identity and improving the well-being of community members. The vilification of Yaffed by Hasidic leadership, much of it originally driven by cynical and dishonest attempts to silence any and all community critics, however, has unfortunately been successful in maligning Yaffed's intentions to the very people Yaffed is aiming to help and in halting any progress. I always knew this outcome to be a possibility but never as self-evident; it is unfortunate that this is how things played out. Alas, this is the current reality to contend with.

Current Yaffed leadership has shown a praiseworthy willingness to reevaluate and adjust strategies. To effectively do so, it is first necessary to reevaluate the intended goals of its efforts.

The Intended Educational Outcomes

When I began my advocacy, I envisioned a Hasidic community largely in its current form but with an improved secular education curriculum, with the Haredi Litvish community in the U.S. as a model to emulate. In Litvish schools, Judaic studies are the primary focus and consume the majority of the day, but a comprehensive secular education is also provided as part of the *cheder* and *yeshiva ketana* curriculum. Unlike the modern-Orthodox who are often viewed as not sufficiently pious by Hasidic standards, no such attitude is generally accepted within Hasidic circles regarding the Litvish community. I therefore saw no contradiction in pushing for such a change and preserving the Hasidic lifestyle. Hasidic girls schools currently also provide a robust secular education relative to the boys schools, so I considered arguments about lack of funding or fear of religious desertion due to increased secular studies exposure as specious. The joy and success I was lucky to experience from a well-rounded education biased me to want the same for everyone else, within their existing community. While there might be concerns with a handful of subjects, such as reproduction or evolution, which would be omitted in a hypothetical Hasidic biology class, I see no direct contradiction between preserving Hasidic traditions and offering an education on par with Litvish yeshivas within Hasidic yeshivas.

In recent times, however, the change I hope to see has shifted to merely wanting Hasidic boys to complete *cheder* and *yeshiva* with a strong proficiency in literacy and numeracy. From my many personal conversations, there's a clear consensus among both former and current Hasidim that they want an improvement in the level of English and math taught in school, but not so much for other subjects. I personally value greatly my well-rounded education I was lucky to receive, and there are certainly many within the community who would benefit from a more diverse secular education as well. But I have become more skeptical that introducing such broader subjects in Hasidic schools would offer net-positive value to the average Hasid or to its surrounding society. I have also grown more sympathetic to the view that exclusion of secular subjects beyond English and math is a fundamental aspect of Hasidic identity. (While some may argue that English illiteracy is also integral to Hasidic identity and future preservation, the clear handicaps this inflicts in present society cannot justify its omission, and I'd venture that most Hasidim would agree with this claim.)

Basic English and math are already being taught in virtually all Hasidic boys' middle schools, but an attitude shift is needed. (Oholei Torah in Crown Heights is the exception with no secular studies, though students there gain English fluency outside school.) Offered after a demanding day of religious instruction and often taught by unqualified teachers, in stark contrast to the religious studies, those classes lack seriousness by students and school administrators alike. Rather than spending time learning, often students use the period to let loose and pull pranks and teachers allocate already meager class time for games or stories. In my experience, those stories and all class conversations were exclusively in Yiddish, even during so-called English instruction. Thus, **the change needed to equip students with adequate English and math proficiency in existing schools lies in a change of attitude, rather than an updated curriculum or the implementation of new regulations.**

There's room for healthy debate on the ideal subjects' breadth and depth to be taught and the value of both their direct knowledge versus acquired critical thinking skills. Even those holding a broader vision, however, must recognize the need for incremental progress to enable adaptability. Given my anecdotal data, I cannot in good faith advocate for imposing more subjects than Hasidim desire without conviction that it would tangibly improve their lives while preserving their community identity.

When I question why there hasn't yet been a shift in the seriousness of the English and Math instructions in *cheder* despite a strong consensus desire for it, most Hasidim raise their hands in resignation. I have yet to encounter a single Hasid to claim in personal open conversation that the current state of secular education in Hasidic schools is satisfactory, but community leadership or schools do not poll members for their input. Such important matters as children's education are to be determined by a select few in the upper echelons, and once norms are in place, the status quo is hard to change. Prior to Yaffed's founding, there wasn't much of an active conversation happening. Currently, largely due to Yaffed's past actions, the community is in an existential crisis mode, where no change that can be seen as caving to agitators, no matter how sensible, is possible.

Government's Role

From my many conversations with Hasidim, **there's a strong consensus opposition against any government role in community education enforcement. Those in opposition include members who believe the status quo is problematic and want to see change.** With such united opposition, governmental bodies are unlikely to be motivated or able to play an enforcing role. If tensions ease, which would first require a cessation in legal threats, there could be room for government to motivate improvements through incentive-based approaches.

Yaffed's current approach of proceeding with costly and prolonged legal battles, even if victorious in court to reinstate regulations, are unlikely to change the educational reality in yeshivas, and they certainly won't help change the hearts and minds of the average Hasid. They are, however, exceedingly likely to continue fostering a sentiment of persecution within the

Hasidic community and breaking trust in government. Even if litigation to demand enforcement is not directly spearheaded by Yaffed and is against the government rather than against the community, such efforts will necessarily reinforce the community's narrative that there's an ongoing battle to forcefully change their way of life. In the past perhaps this wouldn't have triggered a visceral reaction. Given the current already volatile climate, however, such actions will foster animosity. **Spending time, money, and resources by any party on enshrining a law that will almost certainly not be enforced is thus not only futile but severely counterproductive.**

Governmental bodies lack both political will and enforcement capacity to implement new regulations. To anyone watching the stalled "investigation" to determine facts so readily verifiable, from the political horse trading to secretive backdoor deals, from Mayor Bill de Blasio to Chancellor Carmen Fariña, to now Governor Kathy Hochul, this reality should be apparent. The Hasidic political muscle both in City Hall and in Albany is powerful, and it's only strengthening as Hasidic populations rapidly increase. When both the tasked enforcers of regulations and the community the regulations are intended to benefit have continuously shown themselves resisting implementation, expecting the same process to suddenly yield tangible change on the ground is unreasonable.

Arguably this is the democratic political process working as designed. Ultimately in politics, votes are the sole currency; not moral clarity or media outrage. The vast majority of New Yorkers know nothing about or do not care at all about this issue. Of those who do know and deeply care, the vast majority are those within the community who are overwhelmingly opposed to any government intervention. Even if arguments can be presented about [adverse Hasidic economic outcomes](#) affecting all New Yorkers if educational gaps remain unaddressed, unless those effects are tangible to the electorate, they are unlikely to be persuasive in shifting the political balance. Given current demographic trends, one should expect the Hasidic electorate to continue yielding their political power and thwart enforcement regulations for some time.

Even if government officials in all key positions were to have a change of heart or mind and decide to proactively enforce regulations, what would that look like? Mere political pressure or vague threats will not shift the already hardened Hasidic leadership at a time when they've convinced themselves that their very way of life is under attack. If a handful of non-compliant schools in Williamsburg or Boro park are shut down, those students will be absorbed by other Hasidic schools with similar education standards. If all Hasidic schools are shut down—to entertain the near-impossible—lectures would be offered in synagogues or parents would resort to homeschooling, bypassing government oversight and perpetuating the status quo. Individual arrests of school administrators, fining parents for their child's truancy, or forced enrollment of students in schools outside of the community will provoke immense outrage. Such attacks would further reinforce the notion that the Hasidic way of life is facing an existential threat that requires uncompromising resistance. Given that Hasidic leadership has proven itself to be reactionary, any measures that they perceive as challenging the status quo will likewise antagonize the community and cause more damage than improvements. Exiting its existential

battle mindset is a prerequisite for the community leadership to allow for any potential future progress to take shape.

Perhaps there's a role for government to foster good-faith dialogue with community members through trusted intermediaries to incentivize English and math improvements without any threat of enforcement. Standardized testing administered by external proctors could be used to monitor progress. Offering additional funding to schools that can reasonably demonstrate students' competency in English and math, for instance, could be a promising approach, if done with sufficient oversight to ensure funds are not misappropriated. Indeed, [prior research](#) "suggest that policies providing financial incentives for implementing educational standards may facilitate the realisation of the right to acceptable education in Haredi schools more than policies devised to enforce this right." However, **cooperative steps could only be effective if trust between government education officials and Hasidic leadership is first strengthened. This will not happen while there's ongoing legal action attempting to enforce government regulations against community leadership's will.**

In personal conversation, some have drawn parallels between Hasidic education and other past controversial societal issues, such as gay marriage, where legislation helped bring about change. They argue that, similar to gay marriage where litigation paved the way for legal implementation once public opinion shifted, prolonged legal avenues for enshrining education guidelines should be pursued now. However, this argument overlooks a crucial distinction: issues like gay marriage *required* legal codification to be possible, whereas improved educational standards *can* occur without any government role. Moreover, the principle of "substantial equivalency" is already written into law, underscoring that public sentiment alone and not lack of legislation is the impediment.

Given that basic English and arithmetic are already rudimentarily taught in *cheder*, a shift in attitude towards existing coursework is what's most desperately needed, which no regulations can directly address. This therefore leaves no meaningful enforcing role for government intervention in changing outcomes for institutional Hasidic schools. Even those who may believe more subjects need to be taught or significantly more time allocated for secular education, however, should recognize that pushing for them is unlikely to yield significant benefits commensurate with the resistance it would provoke.

Antisemitism

When I first began hearing community *askanim* using the antisemitism line when pressed about the education issue, I was infuriated. Many of them have been disingenuously pushing antisemitism accusations to fearmonger, to gather sympathy, and ultimately to shut down open conversation. And yet unfortunately, while antisemitism claims are still often invoked cynically to stifle discussion, we have reached a tipping point where it's become increasingly harder to disregard them.

Once the educational issue has turned into a fight of "Jews against the government" and "Jews blatantly flouting the law," it's hard to deny that such headlines are likely to inspire tangible resentment among many readers skimming the columns. Another negative article about Jews, regardless of its intent or content, is likely to strengthen negative sentiments about Jews generally in a time when antisemitism has been steadily rising both in the U.S. and globally. My claim is not that Yaffed's actions are necessarily causing antisemitism. Rather, **one cannot confidently deny that negative media stories on Hasidic education are likely to foster general negative bias against Jews in times where Jewish institutions are facing vilifications due to unrelated geopolitical events.**

Potentially negative sentiments alone is not necessarily a reason to cease advocacy; no serious progress in any society can come without some muckraking. If tangible beneficial progress is a likely outcome, that could perhaps justify continued action despite some unintended negative ramifications. But, in the current climate of both festering antisemitism and lack of educational improvements, I deem it probable that continued efforts to press against the community will inspire further Jew hatred and at the same time am skeptical that they will bring about meaningful reform. **The possibility of meaningfully improving Hasidic well-being through existing actions must outweigh the possibility of those actions harming the community or others. In my mind, that is no longer the case.**

In a time of rampant antisemitism when Hasidim face increasing credible threats to their safety, it's imperative that the community can have full trust and positive cooperation with all levels of government. Establishing goodwill between Hasidim and all other Jewish communities is likewise paramount. Ceasing what the community sees as attacks on their way of life and which are unlikely to yield positive outcomes would be a welcomed step in the path forward.

Hasidic Economy

Perhaps the most compelling argument to push for educational reform lies in the state of the Hasidic economy, though on closer examination even that case proves less persuasive than it initially appears. Many Hasidim are struggling to make ends meet, and there's reason to maintain that improving educational standards in Hasidic schools will yield improved economic outcomes. Such economic improvements would directly help individuals struggling, and reduction in poverty rates would also alleviate reliance on government welfare programs, which many in the Hasidic community heavily rely on. Anecdotally, I've watched family members struggle to find promising career opportunities due to poor English, and I have many friends struggling due to lack of high school degrees. Statistically, a [2021 Pew Research study](#) states: "Economic well-being is often linked with education, and that is the case here as well. Compared with more highly educated Jews, those without any college education are the least likely to say they live comfortably (36%) and the most likely to say their household is able just to meet basic expenses (30%)." But the reality of the Hasidic economy and welfare reliance is far more complex and requires a nuanced understanding of its unique social and economic dynamics beyond education.

First, focusing solely on high Hasidic poverty rates to educational reform overlooks crucial nuances. Comparing poverty rates between Hasidic and other communities is difficult due to distinct demographic factors, notably large traditional families. Reported income levels are also often misleading given the sprawling underground economy.

Second, unlike those in the mainstream American economy, many Hasidim do not need high school or college degrees due to their reliance on the unique Hasidic economy. Hasidic neighborhoods function as insular ecosystems, with their own schools, businesses, social services, and rabbinical courts. These institutions and businesses employ many community members. Many Hasidim have also become adept at jobs that do not require formal educational training, such as real estate, construction, or Amazon retailing. Hasidim have a strong sense of comradery and employ other Hasidim when possible. Business partnerships and career opportunities materialize through large family ties, internal community classifieds, childhood friendships, and frequent social interactions through thrice daily communal prayers. Thus, standard degrees, job applications, and resumes are often irrelevant. This does not deny that formal education would provide new opportunities for many Hasidim, but the benefits would likely be less impactful than some may initially presume. Further, even if offered better career opportunities elsewhere, many Hasidim will prefer employment within the community that aligns with religious and cultural norms.

The growing reliance on government assistance programs and questionable legal loopholes among community members are serious concerns that need remediation, but educational improvements alone will not solve these issues. Among other factors, such "*dreidelich*" stem from practices in a high-trust society that have unfortunately become culturally acceptable. The shared Yiddish language, cryptic cultural references, geographic proximity, and immediate mutual trust also enable and help preserve such behaviors. Strong cultural stigmas against snitching, or *mesira*, and misconstrued chauvinistic attitudes also exacerbate these practices.

The Hasidic community exemplifies a noteworthy loving-kindness *chesed* towards one another, ensuring that those in need are cared for like in no other community. The many community charities, *gemachim*, and various organizations are all remarkable. While these facts may not necessarily address the issue of economic hardships linked with community education, they are important to underscore that **mainstream economic heuristics do not hold in the Hasidic ethnic enclave economy**. On the flip side, the presence of many such charities also highlight the need for new practical means to improve individual economic conditions.

The Need for New Community Resources

The most impactful and immediate way to help Hasidic students currently deprived of basic skills they will need for their future is to offer them resources directly. Rather than pursue legal avenues—which will take years to yield an outcome, likely be unfruitful, and possibly stoke antisemitism—strategies with a higher chance of positive impact and which would yield immediate results should be pursued. Instead of a top-down approach of targeting leadership and existing institutions to improve outcomes for the community members, the focus should shift

to a bottom-up approach of offering resources to those already seeking it. Such non-mandatory approaches have shown promise in [Haredi educational improvements in Israel](#).

The creation of affordable after school programs offering tutoring or courses for secular studies would be invaluable to many in the community. Given the many cultural sensitivities, however, offering helpful resources is challenging. Joining a course at the local public library is simply not an option for most Hasidim. The school day for boys middle and high school starts early in the morning and runs until around 6 or much later, including on Sundays, making it difficult to find time that would both not conflict with school scheduling and not during a time when students are already exhausted. On Fridays the school day ends around noon, making it the most opportune time, granted it's early enough in the day to complete before Shabbos begins. Mixed gender programs are not an option, including having a female instructor for boys. There will likely be zealots who will attempt to disrupt any such offerings, and choosing a thoughtful location is therefore crucial. Such programs do not currently exist for above-mentioned reasons, and changing that reality would be a significant win for Hasidic educational improvement.

A grander ambition would be to establish new community schools that offer improved secular instruction. If successful, this would bypass many of the challenges enumerated for after school programming. A new school, however, would likely face stiffer establishment opposition and require substantially more resources to bring about. There is certainly dissatisfaction with existing establishment schools among some Hasidim, especially those not closely affiliated with one of the large Hasidic sects with yeshiva institutions. Institutional schools largely fail to provide systemic teaching of Jewish history, Yiddish spelling or grammar, or even Hasidism. Some view establishment schools as a funnel to increase adherents to its grand rabbi as the de facto primary purpose rather than offering a robust education, even in terms of Jewish studies. A well-to-do Hasidic family member relayed to me his efforts to establish a new community school and the encountered stumbling blocks leading to the plan abandonment. Though unlikely to offer a significant improvement in secular education, the plans for Ziv Hatorah, a new independent school with a distinct religious curriculum in Borough Park, reveal a community desire for new institutions outside establishment control.

The goal should be to offer resources to those already seeking it rather than attempt to persuade the population at large that they need it. Many in the community want better education for themselves or their children and would eagerly welcome new programs or schools that appropriately meet their needs. On the other hand, changing the minds of hardliners is a futile effort, especially in a community with severe media control. The odds of sheltered Hasidim without otherwise external exposure changing their minds if reached by Yiddish mailed flyers or telecommunications are laughably slim; those efforts are more likely to reinforce the perception of sinister attempts to alter their chosen way of life. The overlap between those Hasidim who would want these resources and those with internet access, whether direct or through friends, is ostensibly high, and they can be easily reached with means like WhatsApp status. While there might be some who can be convinced, those efforts will result in diminishing returns.

As people begin taking advantage of new opportunities, this will foster organic conversations within the community, leading to further [bottom-to-bottom changes](#) that help legitimize needed reform. If new offerings eventually attract a substantial number of students, such endeavors have the potential to lead to systemic change. If a clear need for new offerings is demonstrated, existing institutions will need to modify to address changing realities.

While systemic changes from such new offerings are unlikely to soon materialize, the focus of mental health over the past few years exemplifies that sustained improvements in existing community schools are possible once there's a grassroots demand and monetary incentives. New institutions offering broader secular instructions within the community and taught by community members will likely face severe pushback by zealots in more insular communities like Williamsburg or Kiryas Joel. If successful in other neighborhoods, however, then adoption across all Hasidic communities would become more tenable. The upstate Hasidic [Monsey region with its relatively more decentralized communities make it a likely viable candidate for new educational initiatives](#). If such new programs or institutions were to come to fruition, the government and interested philanthropists can play a meaningful role in funding and supporting them.

Elephant in the Room

The elephant in the room is Yaffed founder Naftuli Moster's recent public [interview](#) in which he denounces some of his prior work and distances himself from Yaffed. I wrote much of this document after a lunch meeting with Yaffed's current Executive Director and Board Chair in which I verbalized many of these points back in May, prior to Naftuli's interview. While I did not discuss this with Naftuli, his interview reaffirmed many of my conclusions.

In one of the recent Yaffed meetings, someone asked why we don't see most oldtimers still involved in Yaffed's efforts. *Where are they now?* Someone suggested that some people want a more aggressive fight, and without such a thrill they've jumped ship. That might be true for some people. For many others, including myself and Naftuli Moster, the exact opposite is true. The goal wasn't a lengthy and vicious battle, and once it's turned into that it is no longer worth fighting for. What's crucial is that positive change happens; not that we or I bring about change. **Abandoning legal battles is not a matter of capitulating or giving up on a good cause. It's a matter of recognizing that good-faith efforts are not accomplishing their stated goals and are instead actively fostering distrust within the community they're intended to benefit.**

There's a common Yiddish expression when you're determined to reach a result, "*oder mit gutn oder mit beyzn* - either with good or with bad". That was never my goal. The ideal hope was *mit gutn* but with a more realistic sense that it might turn feisty but amicable. We'll push, but not shove. I was bracing for pushback, but not like this. The current grudging legal battles are more likely to increase community resistance to change and fuel antisemitism than produce a net improvement in well-being for the Hasidic community.

Conclusion

Speaking with Hasidic friends and family, I heard from many people who felt robbed of something meaningful by their lack of education, whether professionally or in satisfying their natural curiosities. I deeply care for those people, and I joined this effort with genuine care to help my community. I knew that the establishment wouldn't take reform easily and that an extended fight with the old guard was likely. But I also knew what and who I was fighting for. **But now that the fight turned into a protracted war, many of those same people are screaming "We don't want this." If my concern is truly for those Hasidic people, I simply cannot continue this effort.** Telling them "I know better what's best for you" would be laughably patronizing. Regime change is no longer a viable or fashionable strategy in the 21st century.

Several of my stated assumptions and intuitions are based on anecdotal data and lack quantification. I have indeed spoken with hundreds of people from the community about the education issue, but my unrecorded samples are unlikely to be statistically significant and are possibly not fully representative. Regrettably, there is a dearth of data on Hasidic sentiment on this issue, and even fundamental information such as a comprehensive list of Hasidic schools and their curricula is notably absent. Systematic and anonymous data collection by a trusted entity to survey Hasidim on their frank thoughts on educational standards would be invaluable to all. Should such data reveal a broad desire for enhanced standards in English and math education, this should offer impetus for institutions to follow suit without conflict.

The broad grip of traditional leadership is waning as the technology of the 21st century is infiltrating the community. The proliferation of smartphones and internet devices among Hasidim, despite continuous efforts to curb them, is an acute threat that has already significantly subverted community norms. Ideas, people, and imagery that previously were only accessible by physically leaving the bounds of the community can now be readily accessed on devices that can be easily hidden and exchanged. The rise of AI is bound to further drastically alter the fabric of the Hasidic community, as it rapidly changes society at large at a pace never before witnessed in history. It's hard to imagine how a forthcoming future of a family in the Hasidic community with a refrigerator and car with default installed AI agents that speak fluent Yiddish plays out, but the community in coming decades will certainly be unrecognizable.

The internal definition of Hasidic identity has already expanded substantially over the past decade, and it's bound to continue evolving. Neighborhoods like Pomona, New York and Toms River, New Jersey are home to flourishing Hasidic populations with levels of openness and modernity unimaginable to me as a child. At a Hasidic cousin's wedding a few months ago, after the traditional melodies, I was surprised to witness a DJ blasting non-Jewish tunes and accompanied by spirited headbanging in the crowd. Music festivals like Sababa attract a diverse range of Orthodox-adjacent Jews, including those still residing in Hasidic communities, and showcase a new and broadening form of Orthodox Judaism. Other astonishing developments include the nascent acceptance of marijuana and some psychedelics. Many of these trends are

still contained to the fringe, but they would've been utterly unthinkable just a few years ago and they're gradually making inroads into more mainstream circles.

I'm optimistic that as the community continues to drastically evolve, more educational opportunities will become available. Many new parents of my generation, who are now struggling due to lack of education, are slowly raising expectations for improved English standards when they send their children to the same schools they once attended. My hope is that incremental change will take shape, giving Hasidim the tools they need to engage productively with the modern, evolving world around them. As new avenues open, other organizations or individuals may step in to facilitate progress.

Sincerely,
Chaim Jay Fishman

About Me

I've had the distinctive experience of both attending the strictly-Hasidic Pupa Williamsburg *cheder* and yeshiva and a New York City public high school, struggling to communicate in English in my early teens and then graduating summa cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania. I have been incredibly lucky to benefit greatly from a stellar secular education after being denied one in my early childhood. I've also been lucky to experience the warmth and rich traditional life that the Hasidic community offers. While I chose to change my personal identity and speak openly about the need for improvements within the Hasidic community, I've maintained a love for the people and culture and continuously valued the community's unique identity as something integral to preserve. I've enjoyed countless personal conversations about the state of education in the community with hundreds of Hasidim, ranging from formerly Hasidic friends to fully devout family members, including many current students and parents. These many conversations, coupled with my lived experience, offer me a unique insight on this subject.