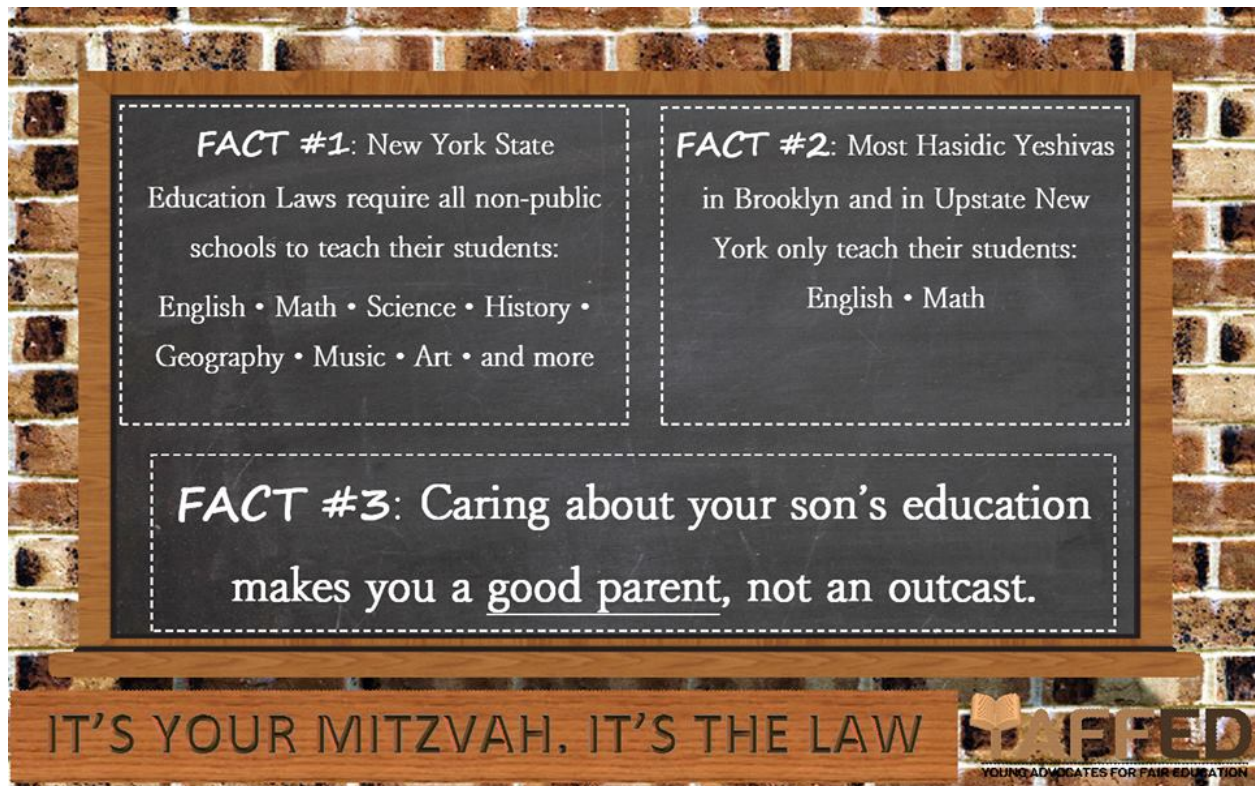




The Hasidic Education Crisis

By: Chaim (Jay) Fishman

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When people hear about children being deprived of an education, they generally think about isolated villages in third world countries. Few people are aware, however, that something similar is occurring right here in New York City and with the government's knowledge. Hasidic Jewish children, especially boys, are being denied an education in science, social studies, art, health and are being taught English and math only up to around second grade level. Although they do receive a full day of instruction in archaic, religious texts, they receive virtually no secular education.

What is Hasidic Judaism

Hasidism originated as a spiritual movement in the 1700s, and it is currently one of the two main sects of *Haredi* or ultra-Orthodox Judaism, the other one being Lithuanian Jews or Litvaks. Both Hasidim and Litvaks are characterized by their extreme religious lifestyle. Men wear white shirts with a black hat and jacket/coat, and women wear modest long dresses and, after marriage, a wig. Seclusion from mainstream society and rejection of secular ideals plays an integral role of community life.

Besides for their different origin and more distinct appearance--many Hasidim dress more medieval-like and have long earlocks [Figure 1]--Hasidim are in many ways more isolated from the world around them. Whereas Litvaks speak english, Hasidim still primarily communicate in Yiddish. The level of secular education taught in schools, especially for boys, is another significant difference.



Hasidic Boys Education

Haredim put a strong emphasis on the value of learning and acquiring knowledge. Based primarily on a Biblical verse, they strongly believe that they have an obligation to “learn Torah”--study the Torah, Talmud, or other religious texts--and that every moment spent doing so will provide them with an eternal reward in the afterlife. Many therefore spend literally the entire day learning Torah. That devotion to studying is also displayed in the community boys schools by their extended daily school days, about ten hours in middle school and thirteen hours or more in high school, or yeshiva.

Since the sole purpose of studying is to obey God’s will, however, Hasidim see no value in any secular studies. They view each moment spent studying non-religious studies as a wasted opportunity that could have been spent learning Torah and getting closer to God. The amount and quality of secular studies taught in community boys schools is consequently severely limited. (According to their beliefs, women are not obligated to learn Torah and therefore do receive a substantial secular education in school compared to the boys, yet still below par.)

In the school I attended, like most other boys schools in the community, up until the second grade the entire school day was devoted solely to Judaic studies. In the third grade we began learning the ABCs, and for four days a week the last ninety minutes of school were allotted for *English*. “*English*”, the term used for secular studies, consisted only of the most rudimentary English and arithmetic.

Most of the teachers, who were all members of the community and thus received the same secular education offered to us, barely knew the subjects they were supposed to teach. For example, my uncle was an *English* teacher in one of the community's boys schools. When my brother once went over to his house, he was shocked to see his wife teaching him multiplication. To his bewilderment, they explained that he is supposed to teach this to his students the next day, so my aunt is teaching it to him now. In class, even when we were taught English, all class instructions and conversations were always in Yiddish.

We completed *English* in eighth grade, the grade in which most students turn thirteen and become adults with respect to Jewish law. (Unlike in mainstream schools, ninth grade was the last year in middle school). After six years of *English*, I was never taught any science, history, geography, government, health, literature, or art. The most advanced math we learned was division, never even fractions.

In yeshiva, despite the school day spanning from 7:00 AM until 8:00 PM, no secular studies whatsoever were taught.

Law Violation and Government Response

The community schools' refusal to provide a comprehensive secular education is a blatant violation of the law. New York State education law 3204 states, "Instruction given to a minor elsewhere than at a public school shall be at least substantially equivalent to the instruction given to minors of like age and attainments at the public schools of the city or district where the minor resides." Science, United States and New York history, geography, arts, physical education, and many other subjects are required to be taught in all schools,¹ including religious schools. Hasidic boys schools teach none of the above subjects, and the education they provide is certainly not "substantially equivalent" to that of public schools.

The government is aware of this violation, but has done little to address it. For years, fearing to alienate the strong community block vote, no politician dared even raise the issue. In response, a few individuals who were raised within the community but were discontent with the education they received founded Young Advocates for Fair Education (YAFFED), an organization "committed to improving educational curricula within ultra-Orthodox schools."²

After YAFFED increased pressure on the City's Department of Education and provided them with a detailed list of 39 yeshivas which fail to provide their students with an adequate education, in July, 2015 the City promised to launch an investigation.³ Now, almost two years

¹New York State Education Department, "1996 Learning Standards of New York State," *New York State Education Department*, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

²YAFFED, "Mission," *YAFFED*, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.yaffed.org>
UJA-Federation of New York, accessed June 6, 2017,

³Sam Sokol, "New York To Investigate Haredi Schools For Lack Of Secular Studies," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem), June 7, 2017,

later, and no report has been released. The schools chancellor, whose office is responsible for the investigation, has also refused to meet with YAFFED representatives. The reason, according to many, is that Mayor de Blasio is stalling the investigation to curry favor with community leaders.

⁴ After continued pressure, the Department of Education announced last month that a report will be released in the summer.⁵ As of now, however, community schools are continuing to deprive their students of a secular education without any government interference.

Community Isolation

Focusing on preserving their unique identity, traditions, and extreme religious piety, the community cherishes seclusion as an integral part of community life. Non-Jewish music, books, and magazines are generally prohibited. Browsing the internet (unless needed for work and with a rabbi's approval), watching television or movies, or even listening to the radio are forbidden. Most importantly, people in the community are not allowed to intermingle with anyone who is not *Haredi*. Learning English or secular studies outside of school is therefore nearly impossible.

Attending a school outside of the community, such as public school, is also not an option for most people. Not attending a community school is seen as leaving the faith and results in community ostracization. For example, when I dropped out of my yeshiva at age fifteen to attend a school outside of the community, I lost all my childhood friends. With the exception of my father, my family members all dropped their support for me. The culture shock, lack of social skills, and language difficulty make it all the more challenging.

Effects on Graduates and on Community

Most Hasidic boys complete high school barely being able to read or communicate--let alone write--in English, and never having heard of words such as algebra or biology. Attending college is frowned upon, and few pursue that path. Some become rabbis or assume other roles within the community and are unhindered by their lack of education, but they are the minority. Most go on trying to find a job to provide for themselves and their family--Hasidim marry at around age 18-19 and often have up to 10-15 children or more per household--and face incredible challenges as a result. In an era in which the education level attained is directly related to income and chance of unemployment and poverty [Figures 2 & 3 on next page], without even a valid high school diploma, they are set up for failure.

<http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/New-York-to-investigate-haredi-schools-for-lack-of-secular-studies-410505>

⁴Yoav Gonen, "City stalls on probe into secular education at Hasidic schools," New York Post (New York), June 7, 2017,

<http://nypost.com/2017/03/20/city-stalls-on-probe-into-secular-education-at-hasidic-schools/>,

⁵Ben Chapman, "EXCLUSIVE: Controversial report on secular teaching at Jewish NYC schools coming this summer," *Daily News* (New York), June 6, 2017,

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/report-secular-teaching-jewish-schools-summer-article-1.3177123>

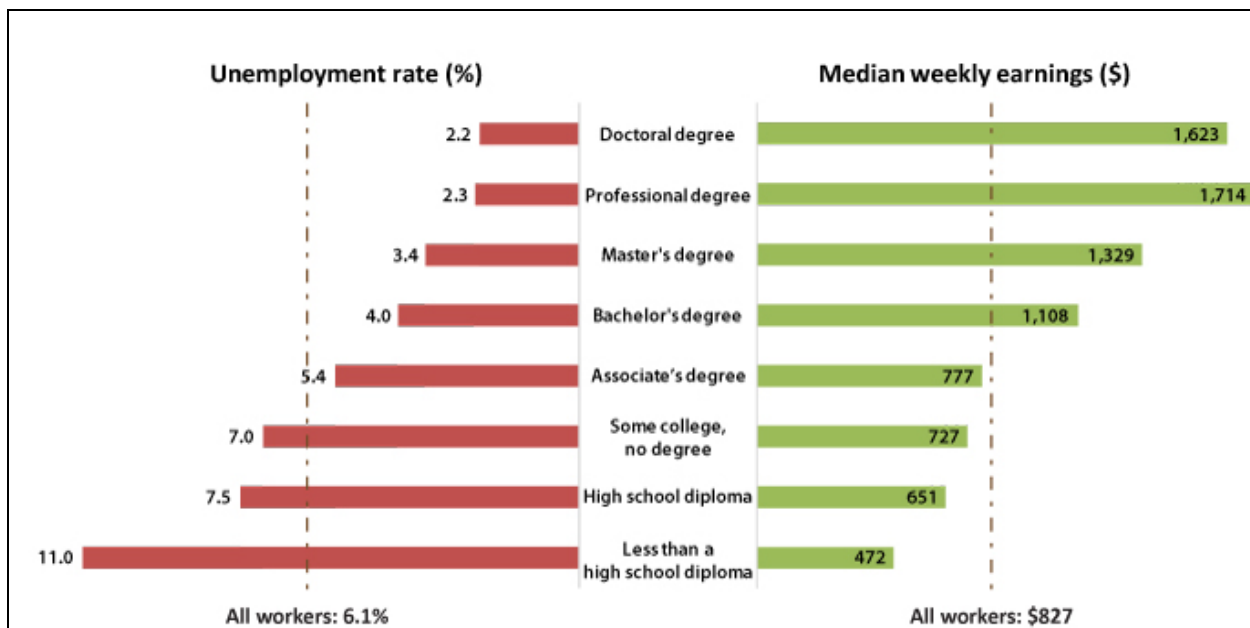


Figure 2⁶ shows the unemployment rate (%) and median weekly earnings (\$) for workers in the United States in 2013 based on their educational attainment.

CEO Poverty Rates, by Educational Attainment

Total NYC Population, 2005 - 2015

(Numbers are Percent of the Population, 18 and Older, Not Currently Enrolled in School)

Educational Attainment	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Less than High School	32.1	30.4	29.8	29.3	30.7	30.2	30.4	31.7	31.8	31.7	31.7
High School Degree	21.1	21.2	21.3	20.4	21.4	22.6	23.8	22.8	23.9	24.1	23.4
Some College	15.0	13.9	14.7	14.1	15.0	16.1	16.9	16.7	17.5	18.0	16.6
Bachelors Degree or higher	7.8	8.0	7.9	8.3	8.1	9.2	9.4	8.9	9.3	8.8	8.5
Total NYC Population	18.3	17.9	17.7	17.3	17.7	18.6	19.0	18.7	19.3	19.0	18.4

Figure 3⁷ shows the poverty rate (%) for residents in New York City from years 2005-2015 based on their educational attainment.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education still pays", *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed June 6, 2017,

<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2014/data-on-display/education-still-pays.htm>

⁷ The Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, "Data Tool - NYC Opportunity," *The Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity*, accessed June 7, 2017,

<http://www1.nyc.gov/site/opportunity/poverty-in-nyc/data-tool.page>

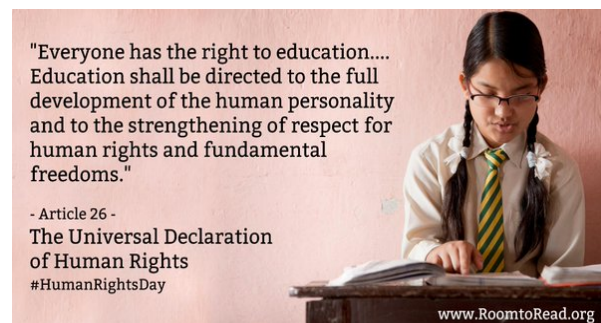
Unable to find well-paying jobs, many are living well below the poverty line and forced to rely on government assistance programs, such as medicaid, food stamps and Section 8. According to a 2011 study by the UJA-Federation of New York, the poverty rate among Hasidic households is 45%, more than double that of residents citywide, and another 18% are near the poverty threshold.⁸ This has made Brooklyn, the region with the most Hasidic Jews globally outside of Israel, the “capital of Jewish poverty in America.”⁹ For example, South Williamsburg, the Hasidic neighborhood in which I was raised, has “one of the highest concentrations of Section 8 housing vouchers in the city”, with more than 30% of residents benefiting from the program.¹⁰

Kiryas Joel, a village in upstate New York whose residents are all Hasidic Jews, has been ranked the poorest place in the United States according to the 2008 census figures, with more than 40% of residents receiving food stamps and about 70% living in households with incomes below the poverty line.^{11,12}

Why You Should Care

The lack of and disregard towards secular education within the Hasidic community is a problem that should concern even people outside of the community. It is a moral, economic, and cultural issue that affects us all.

Education is a fundamental human right. (It has been enshrined as such in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26



⁸UJA-Federation of New York, “Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011 Special Report on Poverty,” *UJA-Federation of New York*, accessed June 6, 2017, <https://www.ujafedny.org/assets/785329>

⁹Simone Weichselbaum, “Nearly one in four Brooklyn residents are Jews, new study finds”, *Daily News* (New York), June 6, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/brooklyn/brooklyn-residents-jews-new-study-finds-article-1.1100080>

¹⁰Lisa Riordan Seville, “Hasidic neighborhood in South Williamsburg is a top beneficiary of Section 8, but some question whether law is strictly followed”, *Daily News* (New York), June 6, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/hasidic-neighborhood-b-klyn-top-beneficiary-section-8-article-1.2639120>

¹¹Sam Roberts, “A Village With the Numbers, Not the Image, of the Poorest Place”, *The New York Times* (New York), June 6, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/nyregion/kiryas-joel-a-village-with-the-numbers-not-the-image-of-the-poorest-place.html>

¹²Matt King, “KJ highest US poverty rate, census says”, *Times Herald-Record* (New York), June 6, 2017, <http://www.recordonline.com/article/20090130/NEWS/901300361>

[Figure 4 on previous page]¹³ and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, article 13.) In the words of Nelson Mandela, “To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.” These children are being denied a basic education and have their future taken away. This is not taking place in some third world country but in New York City. (Most of the children currently completing Hasidic yeshiva in Brooklyn are already the third generation living in New York City.) Imagine where you would now be had you been deprived of basic educational skills needed to succeed that those children are currently being denied. We have a moral obligation to ensure that this human rights violation no longer continues.

The result, as mentioned earlier, is that many in the community are forced to rely on government programs for their basic needs, placing a tremendous burden on the government and ultimately on the taxpayers. The current system essentially takes many intelligent, capable individuals and deprives them of the skills they would need to fend for themselves and leaves them with no other option but to drain the resources of the government public assistance programs. The government's generosity thus serves as an enabler for this system to continue. With 30% of all children in Brooklyn projected to be Hasidim by 2030,¹⁴ the burden on taxpayers is sure to intensify.

Even more troubling is the fact that these Hasidic schools receive generous government funding. Although the exact amounts are not publically available, it is known that “Hasidic schools receive millions of dollars in government funds.”¹⁵ The government is pouring money into schools that set their students up to later be financially dependent on government welfare programs. Without the taxpayer funded programs, they would be compelled to follow the law.

Furthermore, the community's lack of secular education coupled with its isolation unfortunately breeds xenophobia. Never learning about other cultures and their history leads to indifference towards them. For example, how can you expect someone to sympathise with racial injustice committed against blacks if they have never learned about the history of slavery?

Preservation of Community and Tradition

Community leaders fear that exposure to secular ideas will cause many to leave the insular community and thus lead to its decline. On the grounds of belief in cultural relativism and respect for other cultures, some believe that outsiders, including the government, have no right to

¹³ Room to Read, “‘Everyone has the right to education.’ - Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights #HumanRightsDay”, *twitter*, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://twitter.com/roomtoread/status/542751044803891200>

¹⁴YAFFED, “FAQ,” *YAFFED*, accessed June 7, 2017, http://www.yaffed.org/what_s_the_worst_case_scenario

¹⁵Jennifer Miller, “Yiddish Isn’t Enough: A Yeshiva Graduate Fights for Secular Studies in Hasidic Education,” *The New York Times* (New York), June 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/nyregion/a-yeshiva-graduate-fights-for-secular-studies-in-hasidic-education.html>

interfere. Others take it as far as to argue that interfering would violate their freedom to religion. But such concerns should not be a cause for inaction.

Fearing that allotting four-five hours of an already ten to fifteen hour school day will lead to people leaving the community is unwarranted. The Litvaks and a minority of Hasidic boys schools do provide a secular education, yet they face no decline. In the unlikely event that introducing secular subjects would lead to an exodus of people from the community, if the only way a community can be preserved is by denying its members exposure to and knowledge of the outside world and once they have a glimpse of it they will leave, is such a culture really worth preserving? Of course, however, we should not forcibly erase their culture, and religious studies should continue to be taught within the community schools

Believing that we should not interfere with the community's beliefs should also not serve as a deterrent to take action. Firstly, spending some time studying secular rather than religious studies does not violate any Jewish law. Although the Torah states (Joshua 1:8), "and you shall contemplate/study it (i.e. the Torah) day and night"--this verse is the foundation for the community's insistence to provide exclusively religious studies--even Hasidim acknowledge that it is not to be taken literally at all times. Doing things other than learning Torah is perfectly acceptable in the community, evident by the fact that most Hasidic men work most of the day. The talmud even states that every father is obliged to teach his child a trade. Furthermore, countless mainstream, great rabbis throughout Jewish history, were well educated and were doctors, philosophers and/or scientists (e.g. Maimonides, Nachmanides).

The tradition to provide boys exclusively a religious education originated in Europe, where before the holocaust Hasidim predominantly lived in their own villages such as shtetls. Most people worked local jobs within the community, and receiving a secular education provided little practical benefit. Today, however, that is no longer the case; a secular education is imperative for a successful career. Still, Hasidim are resistant to change, fearing that abandoning any tradition will lead to modernization and to people leaving the fold.

Secondly, it is indeed their belief and way of life, but, as discussed earlier, it affects us all. To take an extreme example, should freedom of religion protect and should we not be compelled to combat radical religious fanaticism and terrorism since it based on a community's narrow-minded beliefs? Certainly not. The consequences of the Hasidic community's refusal to provide their children with a secular education is of course not comparable, but the same logic still holds true: we must respect other cultures' traditions and beliefs, but once they negatively affect us (and people within the community) and violate the law, we must take action and disallow their continuation. They certainly should not be allowed to continue to not provide a secular education and then rely on the government to compensate for their irresponsibility.

Most importantly, many people within the community want a secular education but are afraid to speak up. (There is a great, short PBS piece on this: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2016/01/29/january-29-2016-ultra-orthodox-yeshiva-controversy/28831/>) For example, after completing *English* in school, my classmates and I occasionally discussed the level of secular education we received. Most of them conceded that they believe the school should have provided them with a more comprehensive secular education, especially in english and math. Many adults

in the community whom I spoke to about this issue, including some my of my teachers and uncles, agreed with my complaints, but reasoned that “you can’t fight the system.”

Unfortunately, a small but vocal group of extreme zealots set the tone and hold the community hostage to their beliefs. Although many within the community, laypeople as well as rabbis, disagree, no one wants to be the one to publicly challenge the status quo and be labeled as "modern" and not religious enough. Fear of demonization and reprisal unfortunately keeps many silenced. Thus, many within the community are relying on outsiders to take action and effect change.

What You Can Do

First of all, please take a minute to sign this petition:
<http://www.yaffed.org/petition>

Unfortunately, very few people are aware of this problem, and that more than anything else enables the community’s educational system to run its course and for the government to continually turn a blind eye. The most important thing that you can do, therefore, is to simply help raise awareness. Talk to your friends and family about this human rights violation and encourage them to take a stance.

Letting your representatives know that this issue matters to you also goes a long way. You can call, email, fax, or send a letter to one of these representatives:

- Mayor Bill de Blasio
- Governor Andrew Cuomo
- New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña
- Your local Council Member

Use the following website to find out who your local council member is and their contact information: <http://council.nyc.gov/districts/>

You can also contact one of the 13 appointed members of the Panel for Educational Policy, the governing body of the City’s Department of Education. Their names and emails can be found here: <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/leadership/PEP/members/default.htm>. The Panel also holds a public meeting each month, with each attendee given two minutes for a public comment. If you wish to speak about this issue, you can find the dates and locations here: http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/EEC60B81-4221-4C8F-A739-1E0E67000D4A/200114/20162017PEPCalendar_Final1.pdf.



Also consider donating to or becoming involved with Young Advocates for Fair Education (YAFFED). This organization is instrumental in advocating for this important issue and encouraging people within the community to speak up and demand change. Realizing that the Department of Education is extremely reluctant to enforce the law, YAFFED is also pursuing legal actions against the City.



YAFFED raises awareness through billboard advertisements, campaigns on social media, petitions, and informs local politicians of the severity of this issue. It also stimulates conversation about this issue within the community by sending newsletters to local ultra-Orthodox households. You can visit their website at: <http://www.yaffed.org/>

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