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A cultural map of the pandemic

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Almost half of Israel’s population that is currently infected with COVID-19 (about 13,000 as of mid-April 2020) consists of ultraorthodox citizens. The number of people with COVID-19 per 1,000 residents is about ten times higher in the ultraorthodox municipality of Bnei Berak than in neighbouring Tel Aviv.

Yesterday I sat on the curb of the alley in which I live, just as I did when I was a child. Not many cars passed through in those days, whereas now there is a long line of parked cars waiting for the lockdown to end. This enables me to teach my grandson how to ride his bike. Suddenly, three unusual looking figures appeared in this narrow stretch of road. They were ultraorthodox men—they looked like a father and his two adolescent sons—and they were dressed in the style of the Gur Hasidim.1 I have lived in this neighbourhood for the past sixty years, while the Gur Hasidim have been in their neighbourhood, right next door, for forty years. Residents from there regularly visit here—they come to the pharmacy or to the local doctor—and their big yeshiva is in a nearby street. But never before had they passed through our alley—definitely not like this—for a stroll, to stretch their limbs a bit and take a much-needed breath of fresh air in these days of lockdown. They may have decided to take this route because municipality officers are known to patrol the major streets between our neighbourhoods, telling people to go back home.

They passed at a relatively easy pace, unlike the typical ultraorthodox rush to make clear they are not squandering their time (El-Or and Neria 2004). Our eyes met. For one extraordinary moment, a Haredi man looked into a woman’s eyes. He smiled, or maybe he almost did. Then he looked away and walked on with the boys, who looked somewhat more perturbed.

More than thirty years ago, I myself set foot across the boundary into his neighbourhood. He might have been a child then. That was when I was working on my doctoral research about the ultraorthodox women of the Gur community (El-Or 1994).

Since then my connections with ultraorthodox communities have deepened and expanded a great deal. But the most intimate and meaningful closeness I developed has remained long after: a relationship with my main hostess of that time, Hannah. That is why my first phone call when the pandemic broke out was to her. After she was widowed and then remarried, she had moved away from close to where I live in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. But we have stayed in touch and meet every so often.
As ever, each of us serves as the other’s informant. She teaches me about what’s happening in her world, and I tell her about mine. In the course of time, the old balance between anthropologist and (she as) research subject has shifted from me mainly doing the listening to something more equal. Now that I am no longer studying her I can feel relaxed about bringing in more of my own input.

‘We’re at home. We’re not going out. Looking after ourselves,’ she said.

‘And what about the Kanievskim? Those people who continue going to the yeshivas to pray, congregate, celebrate—obstinately, against the rules?’ I asked.

‘Personally, I haven’t heard Kanievsky saying it’s allowed. So I don’t know what it was he said exactly. I know what our Rabbis said, that’s what I stick to,’ she replied.

The actual map of the illness, its dangers, and ways of coping, passes through cultural filters that modify its contents as well as its borders. Hannah got information through her newspapers, her rabbis, and her husband. To begin with, she and he were in a minority: an aging couple with no children at home, trying to be cautious. Others, a considerable part of the community, sought to divorce themselves from what was going on. Constitutionally suspicious of the national establishment and whatever it propounds, prone to conspiracy-thinking, and intensely religious, this population could not accept the injunction to stop Torah studies, refrain from public prayer, and large-scale weddings. The very heart and soul of their everyday life takes place outside the home. Except for on the shabat and Jewish holy days, home is not a place for learning or enjoying one’s time. Cramped housing shared by large families does not make for calm spaces. There is no leisure time, there are no hobbies, there is no form of home entertainment, and so on. Boys leave home when they are thirteen years old to study in residential yeshivas, and most young children eat at least one daily meal in an educational institution. Now everybody needed feeding and a bed. Most apartments do not have open spaces like yards or balconies. To follow national guidelines, in their case, would mean to have between eight and fourteen people locking themselves into a space of seventy to 100 square meters, which is not easy.

Halfway through March 2020, a week after social distancing guidelines had been tightened, I started receiving Whatsapp messages from my friend Moishe (a more modern ultraorthodox man, who is completely hooked into the media). He sent me some messages and video clips he had received from Brooklyn and Williamsburg in New York. They mostly showed fear bordering on hysteria, a sense of death threatening to invade each and every home, a lot of confusing information about the illness, and some details about the victims it had already claimed. Now, I thought, everything will change. The effect on Israeli Haredis of images from Tel Aviv or even from Jerusalem bears no comparison to that of footage coming from New York. Their cultural map is neither national nor local; it is communal. A man dressed like a Haredi, who is speaking (whether in Yiddish, English, or Hebrew) on a clip shot in Borough Park, comes across as bona fide and relevant; his words must be heeded. Minority communities on the margins of their dominant, local culture participate in a transnational space which constitutes their real world. The rest is some kind of ambient noise, one might agree or resist it, and mostly one simply lets it pass. These voices from New York did in fact change the local picture in Israel, convincing the opponents of the lockdown. Rabbi Kanievsky published a message asking the Haredi community to closely follow state agencies’ instructions. But this came rather late in the day. In the first two weeks—during which many hundreds of community members also returned to Israel from the United States—the plague had already spread in the ultraorthodox neighbourhoods.

By this time, secular Israelis grew angry. It was an anger mixed with ‘Schadenfreude,’ alongside hopes that reality would now hit the ultraorthodox and change them. It was a kind

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of wishful thinking, as though this would shake them and make them see that ‘all is vanity’: that their rabbis were irresponsible, and that once again, like during the Holocaust, their leaders were throwing their communities into the flames while scrambling to save their own skins; that there is no God and no cosmic justice, while there is science and medicine and there is the state. That from now on, they must be an active part of that state, have fewer children, giving them the rich and varied education that fosters respect for science and democracy.

‘Is that going to happen?’ I am asked by journalists who come to learn something from my acquaintance with the community. ‘Will there be a big bang? An awakening? A revolt?’

For now, I answer, the ultraorthodox, as a young population which is getting through this illness without incurring major damage, makes itself socially useful by constituting a considerable portion of the so-called herd that is gaining immunity.4

For now, we can get in touch with our own xenophobia and learn a thing or two about ourselves, while hoping, too, that these others also confront the price of their self-imposed exclusion from these times and this place. The current army and positive police presence in their neighbourhoods and towns is unlike the usual encounters, when they come in to suppress mass demonstrations or arrest men trying to avoid army service. Maybe all sides will add some new markers to their cultural map.

For now, also, I see a Gur Hasid and his two sons on an afternoon stroll, passing through my street. They are taking in the houses, the yards, they look at the treetops and listen to the birds whose song has become louder since this hush has come over the world. For now.

Notes
1 Gur Hasidim are the largest Hasidic sect in Israel. Dressed like other Hasidic men in black and white, one can identify them as they hide their curls (peyot) behind their ears, wear their black socks up over their pant legs, and prefer loafers over laced shoes (See Krakowski and Goldrat 2007; Green 2010).

2 Roughly speaking, the Ashkenazi ultraorthodox community consists of two streams: Lithuanians and Hasidim. Rabbi Yosef Hayim Kanievsky (b. 1928) is currently the most prominent spiritual and Halakhic leader of the Israeli Lithuanian society. When official instructions about social distancing and isolation were first made in early March 2020, the rabbi, arguing that interruption of studies would be more dangerous than COVID-19, announced that religious schools should be kept open. Within one week, he reversed his approach, giving strict orders for the suspension of public prayer and studies, and for compliance with the instructions of Israel’s Ministry of Health. The incumbent Minister of Health, it must be noted, was Yaacov Litzman, an ultraorthodox member of the Gur Hasidic community.

3 Like many other Haredi people I got to know, Hannah will not speak publicly and to non-Haredi people, against any rabbis, neither their own or others’. Whatever criticism that exists remains internal. The networks in which more modern Haredis are active, however, do include a variety of voices. Though they defer to the rabbis, they frequently allow for criticism.

4 These people do have some contact with general society, for example, on transportation, in hospitals and work places (for those who work, mostly women), at parks, and so on.

Bibliography
