

COMMUNITY SCOOP:

Shluchei Tzibur: Opportunity Through Community **By Shoshana London Sapir**

This unique academic program offers a valuable education to ultra-Orthodox students

The growing visibility of ultra-Orthodox students with their distinct modest dress code on the Hebrew University campuses is part of a quiet revolution: members of this significant and growing minority are reaching beyond the boundaries of their insular community and integrating into the larger Israeli society. Shluchei Tzibur, an academic training program for haredi (Hebrew for ultra-Orthodox) leaders at the Hebrew University, is supporting that process by providing a select group of mid-career haredi community leaders with the tools, skills, and support necessary both to succeed in acquiring an academic education and to increase their impact on their community.

Program mastermind, Naomi Perl, says the ultimate goal is to realize economic self-sufficiency within haredi society. Herself a haredi woman and mother of ten, Perl sees the haredi community, which is approximately 10% of the Israeli population, as a large and growing untapped resource that has the ability to benefit the whole country. “We have great people but we don’t have the tools and the language we need to realize our potential,” she said.

The program is in its fifth year, having recruited and trained a group of 20 haredi men and women each year and supported them through mostly graduate degrees in numerous departments of the University: economics, medicine, political science, and genetics. The standard recruit

is in his or her thirties, works in the community, is raising a family, has a strong religious education, and has an idea for a project that will aid the community.

As director of the Mandel Programs for Leadership Development in the Haredi Community at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, Perl designed Shluchei Tzibur to fill in the gaps of a religious education, familiarize participants with various aspects of Israeli society, and teach them leadership skills. Perl’s studies at the Mandel School for Educational Leadership helped her cultivate her vision of leadership and dialogue for the program. “I have learned to appreciate how essential these attributes, along with the investment in the right people, are for the future of Israeli society,” she says.

“I explain to applicants that the program is not to improve your ability to make a living. It is not to promote self-realization. It is not to help you make connections and raise your income. All of those things will happen, but that is not the purpose. The goal is for every dollar invested in you to return tenfold to the haredi community,” Perl explains. She says the program’s 90 participants and alumni are already making significant contributions in the haredi community, from encouraging a greater openness in the community towards prenatal genetic testing to revitalizing the history curriculum in the network of haredi girls’ schools.



Naomi Perl: In tune with the community

Perl was born in Jerusalem to “open-minded” Orthodox European parents. Her mother was a Holocaust survivor whose own schooling was cut short by the war, and who was fiercely determined to give her daughter the music education she never had. “She decided to get a piano for me before I was even born,” Perl says. Perl continued her music studies, acquiring bachelors and masters degrees, and becoming one of the founders of the first haredi musical conservatory. Currently a doctoral student at Hebrew University in the sociology of education, Perl sees her situation as similar to that of other women who work and raise families. “We as women do our best and always feel guilty,” she says, even as she acknowledges her extremely helpful husband and children.