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**Ferit BELDER**

Assist. Prof. Dr, Marmara University, Department of International Relations

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**E-mail: [bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr](mailto:bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr)**

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# Making Sense of Risky Haredi Behaviors in Israel During the Covid-19 Pandemic\*

**Ferit BELDER**

*Assist. Prof. Dr., Marmara University, Department of International Relations, Istanbul.*

*E-mail: ferit.belder@marmara.edu.tr*

*Orcid: 0000-0002-0724-0563*

## ABSTRACT

Covid-19 not only posed a threat to the bodies of individuals or their mental health but also disrupted routines that are re-producing certain communities every day. This is particularly the case for communities with already securitized identities such as the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) society in Israel. Its authentic narrative, routines and practices that had been sustained thanks to their decades-long autonomy within the state, faced a substantial challenge when the state-led pandemic measures arrived in Haredi towns. This article seeks to explain the Haredi non-compliance with certain pandemic instructions like closing religious and educational centers, through the conceptual lens of an ontological security approach. It argues that the ontological security concerns of the Haredi leadership hampered them from fully complying with the state-led pandemic measures, even at the expense of risking the lives of individual Haredim.

**Keywords:** Haredim, Ontological Security, Anxiety, Fear, Autonomy

## Covid-19 Pandemisi Döneminde İsrail'deki Riskli Haredi Davranışlarını Anlamlandırmak

## ÖZET

Covid-19 sadece bireylerin fiziki ve zihinsel sağlıklarına tehdit oluşturmakla kalmamış aynı zamanda bazı toplulukları her gün yeniden üreten rutinleri kesintiye uğratmıştır. Bu durum, İsrail'deki ultra-Ortodoks (Haredi) toplumu gibi halihazırda güvenlikleştirilmiş kimliklere sahip topluluklar için özellikle geçerlidir. Haredilerin devlet içerisinde sahip oldukları on yıllar süren özerklikleri sayesinde sürdürülen özgün anlatı, rutin ve pratikler, devlet kaynaklı pandemi önlemleri Haredi şehirlere ulaştığı zaman ciddi bir meydan okumayla karşılaşmıştır. Bu makale, din ve eğitim merkezlerinin kapatılması gibi belirli pandemi önlemlerine Haredi itaatsizliğini ontolojik güvenlik yaklaşımı çerçevesinde açıklama amacındadır. Makale, Haredi liderliğin ontolojik güvenlik endişelerinin kendilerini, bireysel olarak Haredilerin hayatlarını riske atma pahasına, devlet kaynaklı pandemi önlemlerine uymaktan alıkoyduğunu iddia etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Harediler, Ontolojik Güvenlik, Endişe, Korku, Özerklik

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## Introduction

Since the first infection was reported in the late 2019, the Covid-19 has turned into a pandemic, having worldwide effects on the daily routines of people, the state and societal relations in various forms and on worldwide relations by causing a high level of ambivalence. If one direction of this emerging uncertainty addresses the psychological disorders observed among individuals, the other direction must point out the political and sociological impacts of the anti-virus measures taken by national governments, mainly restrictions and lockdowns, making for exceptional moments within the regularity of daily life through the securitization of public health. There is a growing literature on the country-case government responses to the pandemic, and also on the rise of nationalism and populism. However, the potential consequences of state interventions, such as the closures of educational and religious centers, and the reorganization of public space, especially in countries where the pre-pandemic socio-political status quo had already been securitized by the societal actors, are yet to be studied. In this regard, this paper aims to analyze the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) resistance to the nationwide pandemic measures and weeks-long lockdowns in Israel, by asking why Haredim<sup>1</sup> acted controversially and endangered their lives, when the rest of Israeli society mostly complied with the instructions.

To answer this question, this paper firstly addresses the already burgeoning literature on ontological security with great respect for the concepts of anxiety and fear on the one hand, and the disruption of anxiety management mechanisms like narratives, and routines on the other. Secondly, it examines the historical evolution of the Haredi identity, its political accommodation in Israel, and current challenges threatening Haredi autonomy. Lastly, it analyzes how the pandemic measures provoked the existing fears of the Haredi community whilst causing new anxieties, and how Haredim dealt with them. This article claims that during the pandemic, Haredi societal leaders not only failed to articulate the coronavirus phenomenon, its scope and effects to their members, but also lost control over those routines (or the means of societal reproduction) like non-stop Torah learning, congregating for prayer, funerals and other activities, which the Haredi identity is all about. The less control they had over re-productive routines and narrative building, the more anxious they felt, and eventually the more radicalized and controversial their responses became, even at the expense of the lives of many. To do so, the discursive and practical responses given by the Haredi political and spiritual leaders toward the government's pandemic instructions are examined, to see how the sustainability of societal reproduction was prioritized over the physical security of the members of the society. Regarding political leadership, great emphasis is placed on the then-leader and only cabinet member of Yahadut HaTorah and health minister in the early period of the pandemic, Yaakov Litzman. In terms of the spiritual leadership, the responses of the prominent Yeshiva Heads (Rosh Yeshiva) and Hasidic Admors are examined.

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<sup>1</sup> Haredim is the plural form of the word Haredi.

## **Ontological Security and Some Key Concepts: Anxiety, Fear, Narratives, Routines, and Risky Behaviors**

The concept ‘ontological security’ finds its roots in the works of Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing and English sociologist Anthony Giddens.<sup>2</sup> The primary focus of the term is the continuation of a stable sense of ‘integral selfhood’<sup>3</sup> or ‘self-identity’<sup>4</sup>. For Giddens, ontological security expresses ‘an autonomy of bodily control within predictable routines’.<sup>5</sup> From the 1990s onwards, Giddens’ works have become a reference point for subsequent works in other disciplines. It was Jef Huysmans who applied the concept to security studies, by distinguishing certain threats to daily security ordered social relations from ontological security, derived from the uncertainty and the demise of determinacy.<sup>6</sup> Bill McSweeney also underscored this certainty dimension by arguing that ontological security is about being in cognitive control of the situation, and dependent on the sense that the social order is consistent with one’s expectations and ability to proceed.<sup>7</sup>

In her political psychology article, Catarina Kinnvall discussed the ontological insecurities of individuals and groups in the age of globalization and the rise of religious nationalism, as a response to this insecurity, and defined ontological security as “a security of being, a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be”.<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Mitzen applied this approach to the International Relations discipline by defining the concept as “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice”, and argued that similar to individuals, states not only seek physical security but also look for ontological security or the security of the self.<sup>9</sup> Brent J. Steele also attributed the role of ontological security seeking to states, by claiming that its fulfilment affirms a state’s self-identity by affirming not only its physical existence but also how a state sees itself and how it wants to be seen by others.<sup>10</sup> This affirmation by others is also prominent in Ayşe Zarakol’s definition, as she argued that ontological security is having a consistent sense of self and that sense affirmed by others.<sup>11</sup>

The use of the approach at the state-level or the society-level enabled the application of several case studies, to discuss the non-physical security orientations of collectivities. Giddens’ approach attributed a security provider role to society, as it gives individuals a sense of the past, present and

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2 Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, London, Penguin Books, 1990; Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.

3 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 39.

4 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 54.

5 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, p. 50.

6 Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, No 2, 1998, p. 243.

7 Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 156.

8 Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2004, p. 747.

9 Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No 3, 2006, p. 344.

10 Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, London, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 2–3.

11 Ayşe Zarakol, “Ontological (in) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan”, *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2010, p. 6.

future.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in order to justify applying this approach to the state level, Mitzen argued that the identity of a society also requires routinization to provide identity security for the individuals belonging to that particular group, and that state distinctiveness is the assurance of this stability.<sup>13</sup> Following the path of Mitzen, one could also claim that communities, even if they are not necessarily associated with state bodies like ethnic and religious minorities, could be the object of analysis in ontological security research. This sort of shift would be like the analytical transformation of the ‘society’ in security studies from a sector of state security into a security object in itself, during the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> The ontological security needs of societies do not always match with the ontological needs of the states that they formally belong to. According to Uriel Abulof, ethnic ontological security emerges through historical continuity and societal unity, and challenges to these create ontological insecurities.<sup>15</sup> In their studies focusing on the failure of the peace process in Turkey, Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik also underscored the role of a societal narrative which is not necessarily represented by a state body.<sup>16</sup> However, the absence of certain and concrete threats to identity theoretically differs ontological security from societal security, because the former underlines an ongoing concern with its stability.<sup>17</sup> By highlighting the difference between epistemic and ontological insecurities, Abulof emphasized the ontological essence of the question ‘do we have a future?’, by adding ‘as what?’ and ‘for what?’ dimensions.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, for him, not all ethnic communities have similar level of insecurities. ‘Small nations’ or ‘small peoples’, terms he used to define ethnic communities like (Israeli) Jews whose members have deep-rooted doubts about the existence of the collective self, are more prone to existential insecurity.<sup>19</sup> However, in the case of the Haredim, the organizational spirit of this small nation (Zionism) also became a source of threat, as it envisaged a modern nation for the future of the Jewish people, as opposed to traditional religious leadership and its self-image for the answer to the question ‘as what’.

### **Anxiety and Fear**

The difference between anxiety and fear in terms of the former’s lacking a clear object whereas the latter’s having one, and anxiety’s need to be transformed into fear, are two central aspects occupying the ontological security literature. Giddens defined anxiety as a fear that has lost its object, expressing internal dangers rather than externalized danger, and an unconsciously organized state of fear.<sup>20</sup> For Paul Tillich, the only object can be the threat itself rather than the source of the threat, which is in fact nothingness.<sup>21</sup> Rumelili, by giving reference to Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy, also defined anxiety

12 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 16.

13 Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics”, p. 352.

14 Ole Waever, “Societal Security, The Concept”, Ole Waever et al. (eds.), *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993, p. 25.

15 Uriel Abulof, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations: Jews, Afrikaners and French Canadians*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 36.

16 Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik, “Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts: Reflections on Agonistic Peace in Turkey’s Kurdish Issue”, *Security Dialogue* Vol. 48, No 4, 2017, pp. 279-96.

17 Bahar Rumelili, “Identity and Desecuritisation: The Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No 1, 2015, p. 57.

18 Abulof, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, p. 41.

19 Uriel Abulof, “‘Small Peoples’: The Existential Uncertainty of Ethnonational Communities”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No 1, 2009, p. 228, 235.

20 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 44.

21 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 36–37.

as a product of the ambiguity of the sustainable future of one's existence.<sup>22</sup> The lack of a well-defined externalized threat is a determinant aspect of the state of anxiety, which also affects given responses. For Kinnvall and Mitzen, while fear is able to prompt a response in either fight or flight, anxiety, as a general psychic condition, may incite multiple responses in a wide range of possibilities.<sup>23</sup> In the same pattern, Felix Berenskoetter puts knowledge as the anti-thesis of anxiety that generates a feeling of comfort which he defines as a sense of epistemological peace.<sup>24</sup> However, despite this distinction making a stimulating contribution to theoretical thinking, emerging anxieties and already defined existing fears often overlap in practice. For example, during the pandemic lockdowns, Haredi leaders' anxieties have also derived from the existing fears of state intervention into societal autonomies.

### ***Narratives and Routines***

Giddens underscored the role of basic trust, and the protective cocoons which give individuals a sense of the continuity of daily routines, and an environment where you know what to expect, as a provider of the security of self or ontological security, and this cocoon depends on the coherence of the routines themselves. In this regard, chaos lurks beyond the trivial aspects of everyday actions and discourse, threatens the ordinariness of everyday conventions, and interrupts the stable sense of identity and the maintenance of the biographical narrative.<sup>25</sup> By referencing Laing and Giddens, Mitzen also underlined the fact that individuals seek cognitive and behavioral certainty by establishing routines that include routinized relations with others.<sup>26</sup> Berenskoetter also highlighted three mechanisms to control anxiety and provide epistemological peace: specific measures using mathematical symbols and logic (the organization of the temporal dimension via controlling, recording, managing and planning time, which gives a sense of stability), routine practice (everyday practices or a ritual taking place once a year, which gives individuals an illusion of permanence and immortality) and narrative (which gives a sense of temporal continuity between past and future).<sup>27</sup>

Sameness or ordered patterns enable individuals to understand the basis on which interactions will take place.<sup>28</sup> Constant awareness of chaos generates anxiety, but our routines keep ontological fears out of discursive consciousness.<sup>29</sup> For Giddens, routine is integral not only to the continuity of the personality of the agent, but also to the institutions of society.<sup>30</sup> Ontological security centralizes the sustainability of narratives, habits, routines, and a system of certitude,<sup>31</sup> and insecurity emerges with the rupture of the formed framework and its established meanings, practices, and routines.<sup>32</sup> Routinization develops basic trust via regularizing social life, and renders the life and the self know-

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22 Bahar Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security", *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, p. 258.

23 Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens", *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, p. 241.

24 Felix Berenskoetter, "Anxiety, Time, and Agency", *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, p. 280.

25 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 35–70.

26 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 342.

27 Berenskoetter, "Anxiety, Time, and Agency", p. 280–281.

28 McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, p. 155.

29 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 346–348.

30 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, p. 60.

31 Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation", p. 57.

32 Rumelili and Çelik, "Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts", p. 281.



able. Routines are not chosen with rational calculation, but are taken for granted; and even if they may damage physical security, individuals keep following routinized social relations that stabilize one's identity.<sup>33</sup> Producing knowledge, or the act of making the unknown knowable emerges as the principal security-seeking behavior. Regarding the case of the Haredim, the pandemic has brought a sort of challenge to the existing social world that the Haredim know and organize through certain routines, in line with the Haredi religious and societal narrative. The rupture of these routines (regarding its impact on individual attachments to these routines) and the failure to interpret this rupture (regarding the future of state interventionism into the Haredi public space) have been the major sources of anxiety.

### **Risky Behaviors**

Existential anxieties need to be turned into identifiable objects of fear.<sup>34</sup> By securitizing the subjectivity, the stranger turns into an enemy in uncertain times.<sup>35</sup> Anxiety is difficult to manipulate by leaders, as it has no definite object of fear, unlike fear which is used by leaders because they can promise a cure to eradicate it.<sup>36</sup> For Rumelili, conflict narratives contain anxiety by defining a concrete source of threat.<sup>37</sup> In light of the logic of securitization, desecuritization, as not a thought but a performative act<sup>38</sup>, may not be a proper strategy as it requires a sort of revision of one's narrative, practices and even routines. Because ontological security stems from a stable relationship with the other, and does not have to be peaceful,<sup>39</sup> Rumelili has cautioned that ontological insecurities may emerge during the desecuritization process, and these insecurities necessitate the formation of an alternative identity.<sup>40</sup> Her comparison of physical security and ontological security shows that an actor that experiences certainty of being can simultaneously experience concern about physical harm.<sup>41</sup>

This logic also explains the risky behaviors of the actors. Both Mitzen and Steele indicated that ontological security-seeking, or identity needs may compel states to compromise their physical security.<sup>42</sup> Apart from at the state level, Rumelili underscored the relations between minority and majority groups, migrants and host societies as examples that illustrate how the awareness and articulation of belonging to radically different and incompatible identities could provide ontological security.<sup>43</sup> Alongside the lack of building a new narrative, risky behaviors may also derive from the rigid attachments of actors to the routines which are treated as ends in themselves rather than seen as means to achieve goals.<sup>44</sup> During the pandemic, the rigid attachments to routines led Haredi leaders to sustain them even if they endangered the physical security of the members of the community.

33 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 346–347.

34 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 39; Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory", p. 259–260; Kinnvall and Mitzen, "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 246.

35 Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism", p. 756.

36 Kinnvall and Mitzen, "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 244.

37 Rumelili and Çelik, "Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts", p. 281.

38 Lene Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply It", *Review of International Studies* Vol. 38, No 3, 2012, p. 533.

39 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 343; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 3.

40 Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation", p. 54.

41 Ibid., p. 59.

42 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 341; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 3.

43 Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation", p. 59.

44 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p. 350–351.

In light of this conceptual framework, the next section will examine the history of the Haredim, to explain how a particular form of narrative, which is the Orthodox interpretation of the world, became a definitive source for becoming an authentic community, and how this narrative managed to control their anxieties through routines and practices, and how it became institutionalized through the politics of fear.

## **Haredi Identity as a Constant Search for Autonomy in a Changing World**

Anxiety and fear are intrinsic aspects of the very sense of identity in the Haredim. When the creative destruction of modernity hit the traditional bounds of European Jewish society, and Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah) led to the modernizing and rationalizing of the religion (the reform movements), it was Orthodox Judaism that first responded to these challenges and emerging uncertainties, in an attempt to protect the Jewish tradition and societal bounds.<sup>45</sup> The Orthodox narrative was the initial response, aiming to provide an explanation to the traditional Jewry of what being a Jew means, and how to make tomorrow the way things were yesterday. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of political Zionism, the religious Jewry faced another existential dilemma, because Zionism was not only a nationalist project aiming to end the ongoing discrimination against Jews in Europe, but also a process of the re-conceptualization of Jewishness - the creation of a new Jew and the articulation of its political existence as a 'normal' nation (goy) among others - by abandoning the idea of 'the chosen one' character which had been inherent to the Jewish identity.<sup>46</sup> The changing Orthodox responses to this project determined the main patterns of behavior of the Orthodox groups in the twentieth century.

The political accommodation of religion in Israel shaped the directions of the Haredi community. It not only accepted the status of the Orthodox Jewish religious practices (observing Shabbat and Kashrut and the application of Halacha to personal status like marriage and divorce) and the authority of the religious institutions like the Chief Rabbinate, but also recognized a sort of social contract satisfying the concerns of non-Zionist Orthodox groups, represented by Agudat Israel on securing the means of replicating the Haredi society, such as the recognition of independent Haredi education, and the exemption of Yeshiva students from military service. The term 'religious status quo'<sup>47</sup> broadly defines these dual aspects of religious accommodation in Israel. Although it does not address a concrete situation, and could even be regarded as a line in the sand, this concept helps to explain the traditional societal security perceptions of the Haredim, especially on the topic of community-related autonomies. This has turned into a discursive shield used by Haredi leaders against those asking for Haredi contribution to national service like every Jewish citizen, or condemning the Haredi educational network for not applying core courses like Maths or English. That is to say, the religious status quo helped

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45 Benjamin Brown, "Orthodox Judaism", Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, Malden, Mass, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, p. 311–333; Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Haredim in Israel: Who Are They and What Do They Want?* New York, Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations. The American Jewish Committee, 1991, p. 3.

46 Amnon Rubinstein, *The Zionist Dream Revisited: From Herzl to Gush Emunim and Back*, New York, Schocken Books, 1984.

47 For further details about the formation of the religious status quo, see: Menachem Friedman, "The Structural Foundation for Religio-Political Accommodation in Israel: Fallacy and Reality", Selwyn Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas (eds.), *Israel: The First Decade of Independence*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 51–82.



the Haredim to manage their anxieties about the future of religious Orthodoxy in a Zionist state, by assuring the continuation of the Haredi autonomy. It gave the Haredim not only great strength and resilience to survive in a modern nation-state but also concrete assurances like controlling and governing all these autonomous practices which could be securitized when necessary.

The Haredim make up 12% of the Israeli population<sup>48</sup>, and the group is comprised of several segments in terms of ethnic origins<sup>49</sup> (Ashkenazi and Sephardic), religious approaches (Hasidim and Mitnagdim<sup>50</sup> that literally means ‘opponents’, and also known as ‘Lithuanians’ whose ideology emerged as an opposition to Hasidism), ideological stances toward Zionism (disobedient anti-Zionist radicals, mainstream Haredim), relations with the state<sup>51</sup> or with the general Israeli society<sup>52</sup> (isolationists and integrationists), and tribal connections (several Hasidic dynasties like Ger, Vizhnitz, Belz). Such sub-societal pluralism<sup>53</sup> is also seen in formal politics.

Despite the complexity of Haredi society, and politics in general, the attachments and commitments to Haredi ideology and way of life bring them together.<sup>54</sup> Being a separate community that is devoted to learning activity, and willingness to subordinate itself to the rabbinic authority are the central themes of the Haredi society.<sup>55</sup> At this point, Menachem Friedman coined the perfect term ‘scholar society’ (*hevrat lomdim*) to underscore their learning mission as a central aspect of the Haredi society.<sup>56</sup> Learning and teaching religious law and tradition, and adopting it as a way of life are the engines of societal reproduction.

Haredi autonomy started to face serious challenges, which reached a peak in the 1990s and 2000s. The most heated debate was taking place around Haredi privileges, like independent education networks and the increasing number of exemptions for Yeshiva students. In the Haredi perception,

48 Lee Cahner and Gilad Malach, *Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Society in Israel*. The Israel Democracy Institute, 2019, <https://en.idi.org.il/media/14526/statistical-report-on-ultra-orthodox-haredi-society-in-israel-2019.pdf> (Accessed 5 March 2021).

49 For further information about the ethnic composition of the Haredi community and its political representations, see: Nissim Leon, “The Ethnic Structuring of “Sephardim” in Haredi Society in Israel”, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2016, p. 130-160.

50 “Hasidim And Mitnagdim”, *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hasidim-and-mitnagdim> (Accessed 21 March 2021).

51 Division within the Lithuanian circle is noteworthy here. After the death of the legendary leader Rabbi Elazar Shah in 2001, and his successor Yosef Shalom Elyashiv in 2012, the party and the society in general were ideologically divided between the followers of the moderate Rabbi Yehuda Leib Steinman and the radical Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach. The latter group is also known as the ‘Jerusalem Fraction’ (Peleg Yerusalmi) as its centre is located in Jerusalem and takes an active role in the streets confronting the state authorities regarding the protection of societal privileges, especially the exemption of Yeshiva students from military service. After these leaders passed away, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky who is also praised as the minister of the Torah (Sar HaTora) and Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, the head of Ponevezh Yeshiva became the spiritual leaders of the moderate camp whereas Auerbach’s students kept following his uncompromising path.

52 Nissim Leon, “The Haredi-Secular Debate and the Shas Approach”, Eliezer Ben-Rafael et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Israel: Major Debates*, Berlin, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016, p. 131-145.

53 Approximately forty percent of the Israeli Haredi society is Hasidic, thirty percent is Lithuanian, and another thirty percent is Sephardic, while there are much smaller numbers of Haredim not belonging to these main groups. See: Benjamin Brown, *A Guide to Haredi Society: Beliefs and Streams*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved Publishers Ltd, 2017, p. 17, (in Hebrew).

54 Nissim Leon, “The Haredi-Secular Debate and the Shas Approach”, p. 131.

55 Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Haredim in Israel: Who Are They and What Do They Want?* p. 3.

56 Menachem Friedman, *Haredi Society: Sources, Trends, Processes*, Jerusalem, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991, p. 80-87, (in Hebrew).

these two topics were directly targeting the survival of their scholar society, which is ideologically and territorially organized around these educational institutions. However, the Israeli political system and low election threshold allowing for the representation of societal chasms, have given the Haredi leaders a great capacity to define the threats, set out the sources of their fear, and fight against them. This struggle has also widened societal boundaries by re-producing concrete dichotomies like ‘us vs. them’ or provoking fear during election campaigns.<sup>57</sup>

Alongside this constant fight for Haredi autonomy, technology and the internet started to play a crucial role in undermining these pre-determined societal boundaries in both territorial and ideational manners, and in the traditional leader-led information flow system. When the pandemic arrived in Haredi towns, the capacity of the traditional Haredi leadership to lead the society and successfully manage the politics of the fearful (the word ‘Haredi’ literally means fearful) had already weakened to a certain degree. However, unlike technology or these sub-societal divisions, the Covid-19 pandemic came with state intervention and intensified the already existing fears.

## **State Intervention or Being Infected: Which is the Real Threat?**

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Haredi leaders have attempted to make sense of this global health problem through religious interpretation, to guide their followers about the instructions of the state authorities and tell them how one should interpret the pandemic and also why the Haredim were affected more than others (25% of all infected cases were from the Haredi sector at the beginning of February 2021).<sup>58</sup> For example, Lithuanian Rosh Yeshiva Gershon Edelstein told his followers that the Haredim were much affected than others because they are more prone to divine punishment for their sins than seculars who were not educated like the Haredim, without making reference to differing levels of abundance by the anti-pandemic rules between the Haredim and non-Haredim.<sup>59</sup>

By bringing such a divine interpretation to the loss of life, the pandemic narrative was built not at the individual level and in a physical manner but at the societal level and in an ontological manner. Despite their being more severely affected by the pandemic, recent research has revealed that the level of general safety felt among the Haredim was higher compared to the secular public, and a divine interpretation played a religious coping role in decreasing anxiety.<sup>60</sup> This narrative also helped Haredi leaders to resist the closure of educational and religious places. However, so long as these reproductive societal routines are not ruptured, they have ordered their adherents to obey the rules. For instance, Edelstein called on the Haredim to get vaccinated (and so did another leading Lithu-

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57 As an example of this strategy see: Nissim Leon, “An Uneasy Stability: The Haredi Parties’ Emergency Campaign for the 2013 Elections”, *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2015, p.230–244.

58 “COVID-19: Top Haredi Rabbi Says Those Flouting Restrictions Are “Sinners”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/covid-19-top-haredi-rabbi-says-those-flouting-restrictions-are-sinners-657710> (Accessed 30 March 2020).

59 “HaGaon HaGadol (The Great Genius) Rabbi Gershon Edelstein Explains Why Haredim Are Dying from Corona Most”, *Youtube*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93moxf2mkVQ> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

60 David R. Serfaty, Tamar Lugasi, and Rael D. Strous, “Anxiety Reactions and Coping Modalities with the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study Comparing a Population of Religious Patients with Mental Illness and Their Health Caregivers”, *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 60, No 3, 2021, p.1494–1506.

anian figure, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky)<sup>61</sup>, and defined the health regulations as a religious obligation.<sup>62</sup> The Haredi leaders also worked against the stigmatization of the Haredi community as virus vectors spreading the virus, and almost all leaders felt obliged to emphasize that they were not coronavirus deniers, but rather opposing discriminative lockdowns, selectively applied to Haredi towns, which in return fed the existing biases.<sup>63</sup>

However, the pandemic measures constitute a major source of anxiety for the Haredi leaders for at least two reasons that also explain why other segments of society did not feel threatened by such closures. First, pandemic-induced measures ruptured the routinized practices (alongside the supportive narrative) that are at the core of the Haredi societal identity differently from the rest of Israeli society. Any disruption can be seen as a vital threat against this mission-oriented 'scholar society'. The existence of the determined students keeping up their non-stop learning, a narrative underpinning this effort, and non-interference in the places of study (Yeshivas and Kollels) are existential parts of this mission. Haredi leaders' struggle to keep Yeshivas and synagogues open during the Covid-19 lockdowns was in line with its traditional stance against sending their boys, even those who are not passionate learners of the Torah, to do army service, even though there are special units (Hesder Yeshivas) that combine military service and religious practices. Routinized practices in Haredi space provides a sort of protective shelter for the Haredi youth in terms of identity (societal) security.

The second reason was the de-sacralization of the Haredi world in both physical and ideational manners, through the securitization of public health and uncertainty about its limits. Similar concerns regarding the de-sacralization of a symbolic place and interruption to routines were also seen among Palestinians, when the al-Aqsa compound was temporarily closed during the pandemic. By considering the increasingly loud voices calling on state bodies and courts to intervene in curbing the existing privileges and autonomies of the Haredi society in the last three decades, one can claim that there are sufficient grounds for the rise in such fears among the Haredi leaders, and anxieties about whether they can return to the pre-pandemic normal, where they held absolute control over their routines.

The complexity of the Haredi leaders' duties derived not only from a need to provide a Halachic interpretation of the new realities the Haredim face, or from a responsibility to sustain reproductive routines, but also from guarding the community gates against the state authorities. However, this complexity often resulted in conflicting statements and inconsistent actions, which can best be illustrated by the Agudat Israel leader Yaakov Litzman's position when the pandemic broke out. As health minister, he was kept in the position of imposing state measures on the entire society, and being a leader of the community that Covid-19 hit the most, he was the one who suggested the closure of the major Haredi city of Bnei Brak in late March 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic. His position not only justified the measures in the eyes of mainstream Haredim to some degree, but also attracted reactions, especially from the radical groups. Despite the fact that anti-Litzman *pashkevil* calling him 'Litzman Stalin'<sup>64</sup> appeared on Haredi streets, he continued to support this closure; how-

61 "Rabbi Gershon Edelstein: Get Vaccinated As Fast As Possible", *Arutz Sheva*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/461664>, (Accessed 10 March 2021). (in Hebrew)

62 "COVID-19: Top Haredi Rabbi Says Those Flouting Restrictions Are "Sinners".

63 "Virus Czar Apologizes for Criticizing Haredi Rabbi Who Reportedly Bucked Testing", *The Times of Israel*, 7 September 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/virus-czar-apologizes-for-criticizing-haredi-rabbi-who-reportedly-bucked-testing/> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

64 Pashkevil is a wall poster that is used mostly in Haredi Street as a public communication.

ever, he also allowed people to pray together outside the synagogues by obeying the rules (two meters' social distance and a maximum of ten people).<sup>65</sup> The leaders in the non-Hasidic (Lithuanian) circle showed such contradictory responses as well. During the second wave in September 2020, Kanievsky and Edelstein encouraged their adherents to pray outside of the synagogues, without calling for their complete closure.<sup>66</sup>

Regarding the role of the routines and practices on the reproduction capabilities of the scholar community, the Haredim faced another dilemma between the physical threat of the virus and the anxieties derived from the need to sustain such a learning mission. Especially the non-Haredi public harshly criticized the Haredi leaders, by reminding them of the principle of *pikuach nefesh* (a religious principle allowing for the breaking of a religious rule to save lives). The pandemic situation caused a dilemma, either to allow a sort of martyrdom for the sake of the community or protect the physical security of individual Haredim. For Nissim Leon, the 'Torah Wisdom' (*Da'at HaTora*) in Haredi society is stretched between, on the one hand, an approach that encourages risk-taking, congregation, and protection of the community and educational basis, and, on the other hand, an approach imploring by all means possible in the name of *venishmartem meod lenafshatechem* (one has to be careful of her soul (body, life)), even at the expense of collective traditions.<sup>67</sup>

While calling on parents to avoid interruption of the Torah study even for one day, and to keep sending their children to Yeshivas, Kanievsky announced that *Tora magna u'matlza* (the Torah protects and saves).<sup>68</sup> His objection against closure of Yeshivas since the start of the pandemic, despite the government's health instructions, actually reflected the traditional Haredi narrative which underscores the strengthening of Torah education against all kinds of danger.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Rabbi Pinhas Friedman, the head of Belz Kollels, indicated that there are two souls regarding the phrase *venishmartem meod lenafshatechem*, one is physical and the other is spiritual. By making reference to the *chovot halevot* (duties of the heart) and *chovot haivarim* (duties of the body) division in Hasidism, he said that protecting the body is a smaller war and should not be conducted at the expense of protecting the soul in the bigger war between the forces of *kedusha* (holiness) and *sitra ahra* (evil) in terms of spirituality. For him, disrupting Torah education risks undermining students' attachments to the Yeshivas, and eventually results in a greater loss.<sup>70</sup>

At the beginning of the pandemic, the notable Yeshivas from all sectors of the Haredim decided to keep up the Torah learning while obeying the social distance rules.<sup>71</sup> For example, Rabbi

65 "Litzman: Imposing Closure on Bnei Brak, The Situation There is Terrible and Warning", *Yedioth Ahronot*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5704553,00.html> (Accessed 10 March 2021), (in Hebrew).

66 "The Greatest Rabbis of Haredim: Do Not Close Synagogues, Pray Outside", *Srugim*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.srugim.co.il/494247-זוהב-ללפתהל-מידרהה-מינברה-ילודג-494247> (Accessed 15 March 2021), (in Hebrew).

67 Nissim Leon, "The Haredi Society (HaHevra HaHaredit)", Nitza Berkovitz (ed.), *A Sociological Lexicon for the Corona Time*, Adva Center & Israeli Sociology, 2021, pp. 81–82, (in Hebrew).

68 "Maran Hagara'ch Kanievsky: It is mandatory to send children to educational institutions; 'Torah Protects'", *Kikar HaShabbat*, 20 August 2020, <http://www.kikar.co.il/372322.html> (Accessed 15 March 2021), (in Hebrew).

69 Yedida Stern, "Integration of Haredim to Israeli Society, Under Cover of the Corona", *Israel Democracy Institute*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/31197> (Accessed 10 March 2021), (in Hebrew).

70 "Belza Explains: 'A War Between Sacred and Profane'", *Kikar HaShabbat*, 6 October 2020, <http://www.kikar.co.il/375894.html> (Accessed 15 March 2021), (in Hebrew).

71 Jeremy Sharon, "Flagship Ultra-Orthodox Yeshivas Learn Torah despite Coronavirus", *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/flagship-ultra-orthodox-yeshivas-learn-torah-despite-coronavirus-621060> (Accessed 20 March 2021).

Yissachar Dov Rokeach (leader of the Belz) discounted the government's instructions and always kept the Yeshivas open, because of the threat of the indefinite departure of the Haredi students. So, this decision was not only a reflection of the Haredi pandemic narrative emphasizing God's will, but also eradicated any potential threats to the continuation of non-stop education practice. Ger Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh Alter saw the same threat and decided to re-open the Yeshivas after seeing a high dropout rate despite his earlier decision to close them.<sup>72</sup> Losing enrolment in the Yeshivas if they stayed closed too long was the primary concern, and caused such hesitant responses.<sup>73</sup> However, high infection rates among the Haredim, and public outcry against the Haredi leadership left them out on a limb and caused them to revise their decisions regarding the openings of Yeshivas, despite the government ordered lockdown.<sup>74</sup> Alongside the firm resistance of some Hasidic groups, the Jerusalem faction also saw all kinds of official attempts as an intervention and a threat to their way of life, in line with its pre-pandemic position.<sup>75</sup>

Apart from keeping the Yeshivas and synagogues open, other communal activities in Haredi space, such as participating in religious celebrations, weddings, and funerals also became an arena of confrontation. For example, during Tu B'shevat celebrations, while mainstream Haredi leaders ordered them not to hold Tishes (mass gatherings with the senior rabbi of the dynasty), different Hasidic groups including the Belz Hasidic dynasty, as well as extremist Hasidic groups mainly living around Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood organized events.<sup>76</sup> It was not only radicals who opposed the disruption of religious practices but also other Haredim as well. Litzman, then the Housing and Construction minister (after leaving the Health Ministry in the new coalition), resigned from the ministry over the government-imposed lockdown on the Yamim Nora'im (the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in September or October).<sup>77</sup> Such activism through a strong attachment to routine was also seen when thousands of Haredim walked to Jerusalem for Purim<sup>78</sup> when transport was denied them.<sup>79</sup> Mass participation in weddings (especially in Hasidic circles)<sup>80</sup> or funerals, in both

72 Rikki Sprinzak, "Why This Haredi Rabbi Won't Close Yeshivas despite COVID", *Haaretz*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-why-this-haredi-rabbi-won-t-close-yeshivas-despite-covid-1.9229416> (Accessed 11 March 2021).

73 David Weinberg, "Understanding Haredi Defiance to COVID-19 Regulations", *The Jerusalem Post*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/understanding-haredi-defiance-to-covid-19-regulations-opinion-657097> (Accessed 5 January 2021).

74 Haviv Rettig Gur, "Enfeebled and Enraged, Haredi Society Feels Forsaken on All Sides", *The Times of Israel*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/enfeebled-and-enraged-haredi-society-feels-forsaken-on-all-sides/> (Accessed 10 March 2021).

75 Pnina Pfeuffer, "War between Light and Darkness: Why Hasidim Break the Corona Instructions", *Siha Mekomit*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.mekomit.co.il/א-ם-ירפמ-מידסה-המל-ך-שוהל-רוא-ניב-המהלמ/> (Accessed 10 March 2021). (in Hebrew); "Day 3 in Lockdown: Confrontation between Police and Members of the Jerusalem Faction", *Kan Hadashot Youtube*, 10 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUIF7LGMbZ8> (Accessed 20 January 2021).

76 "Hundreds attend illegal Hasidic holiday gathering in Jerusalem", *Yedioth Ahronot*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/BkPJfqqgIO> (Accessed 26 April 2021).

77 "Yamim Nora'im", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yamim-noraim> (Accessed 12 May 2021).

78 Purim is a Jewish holiday that is celebrated on the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of Adar.

79 "Denied Transport, Haredi Israelis Walk to Jerusalem for Purim Parties", *Yedioth Ahronot*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/HJASZ7Yzu> (Accessed 06 March 2021).

80 "As Infections Surge, Mass Ultra-Orthodox Weddings Held despite Lockdown Rule", *The Times of Israel*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-infections-surge-mass-ultra-orthodox-weddings-held-despite-lockdown-rules/> (Accessed 11 March 2021).



moderate and radical groups<sup>81</sup>, despite the ban on gatherings, were other practices which were closely related to the survival of Haredi autonomy, and the performative acts of the Haredi resistance. That is to say, they not only continued their routines in line with the Haredi understanding of the world, but also re-positioned themselves against the state. From this perspective, these ontological security-seeking behaviors of all these different groups within the Haredi society proved themselves in terms of continuing the routines that define the Haredi identity. However, despite not being coronavirus deniers, these responses undermined the nationwide pandemic measures, and in return increased the voices against the religious status quo based on Haredi autonomy, which had already been debated for decades.

## **Conclusion**

During the pandemic, the Haredi leaders sought to keep up all their societal practices and routines, despite nationwide lockdowns, and restrictive measures. It was not because they were misinformed of the seriousness of the virus but because they wanted to keep societal boundaries (and societal identity) surviving by the end of the pandemic. The survival of the societal boundaries had two categorically different but interrelated concerns. The first concern was regarding the continuation of routines and practices to reproduce the society every single day and it posed no clear external threat. A rupture was itself a source of anxiety at this point. The second concern was regarding the state-led measures, compulsory instructions in autonomous Haredi streets, and it constituted a very clear and already identified threat, which is of state intervention in itself. The pandemic era provided an extraordinary situation, and made Haredi autonomy vulnerable to state interventionism on the grounds of public health. Despite this interventionism having already been defined as a major source of threat, and Haredim having had to learn to deal with it (sometimes by provoking fear in elections), the pandemic era made the securitization of health possible, increased the interventionist capacity of the state and more importantly left the future of this capacity uncertain, especially over other core issues like educational autonomy.

Haredi leaders' controversial responses to the pandemic measures, even at the expense of risking the physical security of individuals, show how ontological security-seeking prevails at the societal level. The Haredi case contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge of ontological security, by revealing the close relationship between existing fears and emerging anxieties at the societal level on the one hand, and making sense of the clashes of ontological and physical security needs on the other. It was the uniqueness of the Haredi mission that made the Haredi leadership anxious about the rupture of routines and its potential consequences, such as the normalization of state interventionism, or the declining attachments of Haredim to these routines. However, this sort of co-existence of fear and anxiety in the emergence of ontological insecurities may also be identified in other cases where the already securitized boundaries of the state-society relations begin to shatter during the pandemic or pandemic-like global crises in the contemporary world.

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81 "For Second Time in One Day, Thousands Attend Funeral of Haredi Rabbi against COVID Restrictions", *Haaretz*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-for-second-time-in-one-day-thousands-attend-funeral-of-haredi-rabbi-in-j-lem-1.9498945> (Accessed 5 February 2021).



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