The Jews of the Jews

The mindset behind the *New York Times*' slander of Hasidim

by Moshe Krakowski

Oh the Protestants hate the Catholics

And the Catholics hate the Protestants

And the Hindus hate the Muslims

And everybody hates the Jews

—Tom Lehrer

On September 11, the *New York Times* published a 6,900-word exposé of New York State's Hasidic yeshivas under the title "In Hasidic Enclaves, Failing Private Schools Flush with Public Money." According to the *Times*, the state's 100-plus Hasidic boys' schools fail their students "by design," subjecting them to "levels of educational deprivation not seen anywhere else in New York." Teachers beat students routinely. Graduates come out unemployable and thus unable to escape. And all this on the taxpayers' dime. Protected by the powerful bloc vote they control, Hasidic leaders have been bilking Jane and Joe Taxpayer for huge amounts of illicit funds to run these schools—over $1 billion just in the past four years.

This all sounds horrible. But is it true?

Reporters Eliza Shapiro and Brian M. Rosenthal throw around a lot of numbers to give the impression of in-depth reporting. But if you look more closely, it becomes obvious that they *began* with their findings and chose the numbers to match.

In fact, the article lines up point by point with the platform that anti-yeshiva activists have been pushing for years. And while Shapiro and Rosenthal say they interviewed 275 people, most weren't

Hasidim. The reporters admit that only a few dozen of the people they spoke with still live in the Hasidic community, all of them fierce critics of the yeshivas.

These 275 activists and critics hold important views that deserve to be heard. But so do the thousands upon thousands of Hasidim who disagree with them. Shapiro and Rosenthal ignore *these* people completely. Amazingly, the reporters made only a single visit to an actual Hasidic yeshiva. They didn't talk to any parents who support the schools just as fiercely (they aren't hard to find). And—this is actually hard to believe—it appears that they didn't bother contacting current school administrators until after the article was nearly complete.

The result? The entire article approaches Hasidim as *other*, as if they somehow don't belong to the rest of American society. One billion dollars sounds enormous—indeed, it is made to sound enormous, since the piece could have said the annual amount is $250 million but instead multiplied it by four to hit the 10-figure jackpot. But we are talking about a huge group of schools, and per student, this actually comes out to a few thousand per year, and much if not most of that is directed to funding school lunches and child care. For comparison's sake, New York City spends $30,000 per pupil in public schools. Twenty percent of the Hasidic schools' $1 billion came from a one-time stimulus Covid-19 payment the schools received during the pandemic. The article manages to make these run-of-the-mill expenses sound sinister. Take this account:

> The city voucher program that helps low-income families pay for child care now sends nearly a third of its total assistance to Hasidic neighborhoods, even while tens of thousands of people have languished on waiting lists. The program provides more than $50 million a year to Hasidic boys' schools that claim the end of their regular school day as child care, records show. Yeshiva Imrei Chaim Viznitz in Borough Park had 735 boys enrolled in 2019, state records show, and collected funding from 650 vouchers that year, city records show. Parents there said administrators coached them on applying for vouchers and other programs.

Are Hasidic schools wrong to "claim" the end of the school day as child care? The *Times* can only insinuate here, since the article presents no evidence this isn't a completely legitimate use of these funds. By contrasting Hasidic children to the tens of thousands languishing on waiting lists, the reporters are implying that Hasidic children somehow deserve child-care vouchers less than

"regular" children. Why? Moreover, for any other community, the last sentence would likely have read: "Parents at School X say that the school has been extremely helpful in guiding them through the bureaucratic red tape that often makes it difficult for them to secure funding." If about a low-income community, this might even have been the focus of a positive profile: "How schools help parents access the funds they need."

This bias clouds the article's conclusions, even the weightiest ones. Shapiro and Rosenthal allege rampant physical abuse within Hasidic schools. This part of the article is as painful to read as the subject is important. That's why it's crucial to get the story right. There *are* substantial anecdotal data that Hasidic schools employed regular corporal punishment within recent memory, long after most American schools had abandoned the practice. Yet there's also substantial anecdotal evidence that this is no longer the case, and that Hasidic schools have stepped back dramatically from corporal punishment in the past decade. Shapiro and Rosenthal mention the change, but only to minimize it—using shocking stories to paint the practice as commonplace without clarifying how prevalent it currently is.

Only one piece of hard data appears. In 2019, we are told, students at a dozen Hasidic schools uniformly flunked standardized tests in math and English, a worse outcome than for any other students in the state. These are real numbers, although it's worth noting that they may not be as meaningful as they seem; Hasidic schools use their own internal metrics that they take more seriously than state tests, which means that it's possible students sit for state exams pro forma without actually trying to succeed on them. This aside, Shapiro and Rosenthal don't contextualize their blockbuster finding clearly. These are not the only Hasidic schools that took the test in 2019. Why cherry pick these 12 schools? The article doesn't say and the data don't appear to be publicly available.

And how do these results compare to other schools in New York? Those data *are* available, and in a deeply dishonest move, Shapiro and Rosenthal fudge them. They artfully avoid comparing Yiddish-speaking Hasidic students with other so-called English language learner (ELL) *students* in New York. Instead, they set these kids against "*schools* that are majority ELL," which they claim

perform “exponentially” (*sic*) better. Here’s the relevant comparison: In 2019, only 9 percent of current ELL students in New York City public schools passed the English exam.

More important than test results is the claim that Hasidic yeshivas mire students in multigenerational poverty. The article includes several long and tragic personal histories about Hasidic teenagers who tried to leave their communities and encountered serious obstacles because of how poor their English and math skills were. These are affecting accounts worth telling. But they’re still only part of a much more complicated story. What about those who stay, or those who leave and don’t report such difficulties? It would have been just as easy to find and discuss people at the other end of the spectrum. Like the mother I know who is both a Satmar Hasid and an adjunct professor at a major university; or the Satmar linguist; or the Hasidic Ph.D. student in history; or the bio-engineer from the Bobov sect; or his neighbor who remains in a Bobov enclave while sending his children to a Modern Orthodox school outside the community; or the ex-Hasid who directs digital technology at a major cosmetics brand and credits her upbringing with her success.

But, you might object, surely those people aren’t represen-tative of most Hasidim. No, they’re not. There are probably something like 200,000 Hasidim in New York State, so it would be hard to provide an accurate picture of what Hasidic life is like by focusing on those with advanced degrees, or those who pursue more secular education. A small number of individual stories, in either direction, is simply a distortion. Which is precisely the point. What’s really needed is a clear picture of Hasidic job and income outcomes overall, and Shapiro and Rosenthal don’t address either question. By using a small, hand-selected group of individuals as stand-ins for an enormous and varied population, the article appears to tell readers a lot more about Hasidim than it really does.

What it tells them is that Hasidim are terrible. You’d be hard-pressed to distinguish many of the comments readers left on Shapiro’s and Rosenthal’s article with commentary taken from a neo-Nazi website. Readers felt no qualms bashing Hasidim in terms that would certainly sound anti-Semitic if applied to any other Jews—as “virulent,” “hermetic, anti-science, selfish,” a “small,

extremist cult" following "a closed, brutal way of life" that endangers other New Yorkers by "spread[ing] disease." "Interesting [that] they are willing to take from society but not participate in society." "Politicians are afraid of them." "They may lack a formal education but are savvy enough to find every legal loophole to benefit them." "Maybe next the *Times* can investigate male genital mutilation?" (Some commenters added healthy doses of Islamophobia and anti-black racism for good measure, invoking "madrasas," the Taliban, and "welfare queens" to decry New York Hasidim.)

To the extent that readers expressed sympathy for Hasidim, it was as victims of their leaders. It seems obvious from Shapiro's and Rosenthal's reporting that people must be held captive in these cult-like communities. But people do leave Hasidic communities, for many reasons—not only the ones the article details, but others, too. People also choose to join them. By many metrics, Hasidic communities are among the most attractive and vibrant Jewish communities around. They offer a life that many people love. The article doesn't give readers the faintest idea that this might be so, much less why it might be so.

In one commenter's words, "This article describes what is essentially child abuse.… There is not a word here about the joy of learning, the pleasures of friendship, independence of thought, or growth into one's own individual self."

Indeed. Readers of this article would never know that Hasidic life—including Hasidic schools—contains joy and friendship and growth in spades.

It's not just the *New York Times*. Everyone, *especially other Jews* (including supposed experts on Haredim), "knows" something about the ultra-Orthodox Jews who go by the group term "Haredim," including but not limited to Hasidim. The "knowledge" is inevitably negative. It is also bewilderingly contradictory. In academia, in the news media, in books, movies, television, and Netflix specials, Haredim—and in particular, Hasidim—are portrayed both as backwards and ignorant, *and* slick and conniving; as exotic "others" who are also monolithically dull, drab, and

humorless; as radical Trumpists who also hold the Democratic New York machine in the palm of their hands.

None of these characterizations is true. Haredi society is complex, vibrant, flawed, and deeply human—as all communities are. Above all else, Haredi society is just that: a society. It's not a fanatical cult where people sit in divine contemplation all day thinking about the Torah and Talmud. It's not a hyper-controlled autocracy where people have to follow the rabbis or else their lives are ruined. Overall, it's not a particularly poor community, or a particularly wealthy one—and it's certainly not on the verge of collapse, as many non-Haredim both predict and hope. Its education system doesn't look anything like modern public schools, but contra the hyperbolic claims presented in the *Times*, it is very effective at preparing students for life—just not the life secularists think these students should have.

Which raises the question: Why are oversimplified and often deeply distorted portraits of Haredim so commonplace?

The answer, sadly, is that the mere existence of the Haredim challenges all sorts of claims about religion and modernity that other Jews, in particular, hold sacred. These radically countercultural Jews go out of their way to reject society's values and norms, and so validate everything other Jews secretly fear. They are a living embrace of the idea that the Jew *is* different. For reminding everyone of this, they are either scorned, or reduced to a shtetl fairy tale, or more often, hated.

When it comes to Haredim, the rules of polite discourse do not apply, and generalizations, prejudice, and bigotry are proffered as self-evident fact.

If, as Tom Lehrer sang, "everybody hates the Jews," whom do the Jews hate?

Haredim. They are the Jews of the Jews.

At the lowest level—in movies and on TV—portrayals of Haredim are so outlandish that they go beyond slander into a new category of hostile caricature. In recent years, cartoonish versions of ultra-Orthodox life have appeared in the Netflix drama *Unorthodox*, the Netflix reality show *My Unorthodox Life*, and then the documentary *An Unorthodox Education*.

Notice a pattern?

Each of these shows offers audiences around the world what's often their first and only look at such Jews. Yet each presents Haredi Judaism solely from the perspective of those who have rejected it. Each portrays Haredim negatively. And each adopts regressive attitudes toward Haredim that rely on a narrow set of tropes: Eastern European accents, dark drapes, bad sidelocks, and clueless rabbis; clever business sharks, slumlords and secret money, politicians in one's pocket; repression of the masses by corrupt leaders, communal ignorance, dual loyalties—and so on.

Most important, *Jews* are involved in running these shows, and they are similarly involved in news media, academic Jewish studies, and a good chunk of the cultural infrastructure of New York City. In these contexts as well, distorted portrayals of Haredim allow more liberal Jews to feel comfortably superior in their own practices while ignoring the impact that these portrayals might have on perceptions of Jews around the country. While insular Jewish publications may overflow with cycles of op-eds and think pieces either bemoaning or celebrating these shows, most ordinary Americans will have no idea that these depictions of Haredi Jews are even open to question. Nor will most viewers distinguish between Haredi Jews, Modern Orthodox Jews, and religious Jews of any kind. Average Netflix viewers will understandably presume that these onscreen portrayals give them an accurate, insider's view into the world of Orthodox Judaism.

You might think that at the very least an educated intellectual consumer could develop a fairly accurate understanding of Haredim by reading academic literature, or by carefully reading the news. You would be wrong. In fact, academics and journalists are a major *source* of the problem, not the solution. As Eli Spitzer, a Hasidic-school headmaster in London who writes for Mosaic, has

noted, it is “the defective treatment of *Haredim* by academics—almost always Jewish—that has trickled down into the fantasies of popular culture.” The result is a cascade of distortion that starts within academia, moves down through the media, and empties itself into our collective consciousness in a form that bears no resemblance to the actual lives lived by Haredim.

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Demographically and sociologically, Haredi Judaism is a remarkably successful Jewish response to modernity—perhaps *the* most successful. Haredim make up the most rapidly growing segment of American Jewry. According to one estimate, more than 40 percent of all Jews under 20 in New York (the center of Haredi life) speak Yiddish as a first language. The 2020 Pew report on American Jewish life estimates that 1 in 10 Jews in North America under age 30 is Haredi (and there are good reasons to think this is a serious undercount).

Beyond sheer numbers, the eruption of an entire cultural, economic, and religious infrastructure around Haredi sensibilities has transformed Jewish life well beyond the borders of Haredi communities. Yet most Americans know very little about this culture—even (or especially) scholars and journalists who focus on American Judaism. Take the 2020 Pew study of American Jews. This massive survey aimed to capture basic information about American Jews: demographics, beliefs, practices, religious engagement, etc. This was an important opportunity to uncover much-needed information about the rapidly growing Haredi community. Yet choices baked into the Pew study’s design all but guaranteed that few Haredim would participate. Pew chose not to administer a version of the survey in Yiddish; they used paper ballots rather than phone surveys, ensuring that most Hasidim would toss this foreign-language (English) mailing in the trash; and they did not recruit any Haredim to help conduct interviews, which might have discouraged buy-in from Haredi respondents.

The previous Pew data from its survey taken from 2013–15 claimed to provide a reliable sample of Haredim but offered a picture that was absurd to anyone with even a passing knowledge of Haredi communities. Only 76 percent of the Haredim this poll described avoided handling money on the

Sabbath, where the number is likely close to 100 percent. Similarly, 15 percent of the previous survey's Haredim supposedly attended non-Jewish religious services at least a few times a year, and 1 percent of Haredim put up a Christmas tree.

If Pew had been serious about capturing the Haredi community, it could have conducted such a survey. But Haredim are, as they always have been, a sideshow to the larger American Jewish self-conception, even as they now represent the most vital and fertile Jewish culture and religion in the U.S.

The academic study of Haredim in America has distorted its subject, sometimes inadvertently, in three major ways. The first is the streetlight fallacy—the problem of looking for evidence where it's easiest to spot, rather than where it's actually most abundant.

Most researchers access Haredi culture through public records, newspaper articles and advertisements, websites and chat rooms, op-eds, popular literature, and rabbinic pronouncements. Scholars use this material to try to understand what Haredim think and how they navigate modernity.

Much of this work examines material in English and ignores Yiddish-language output. But even where Yiddish is included, this approach has built-in limits. Online discussions, position papers, wall posters, and arguments that take place in the public sphere involve only a small—very nonrepresentative—portion of the community. And they tend to focus on especially controversial and polarizing issues, amplifying the *ideological* aspects of the Haredi communal experience at the expense of many others. This kind of material gives us insight into the opinions of those who are in the ‘‘business of ideas.’’ But it tells us little about the daily lives and cultural worlds of most other community members—what in other contexts has been termed ‘‘everyday" or "lived" religion.

Yes, it's hard to go into Haredi communities—particularly Yiddish-speaking ones—and get to know them from the inside. It's much easier to analyze the transcripts of a month's worth of Internet chats or the back catalogue of a Haredi book publisher. It may seem compelling to look at

the speeches and polemics of a particular communal leader and pass that off as insight into a community. Yet interesting as such material is (and it *is* interesting), it simply doesn't give a complete picture of Haredi life and culture.

Moreover, without insider knowledge and familiarity with Yiddish, it's easy to misinterpret this material. Even otherwise capable scholars in this field sometimes betray such a lack of basic familiarity with Orthodox communities that they make laughably absurd errors. Researchers frequently don't know what they don't know.

One of the classic works of American Haredi sociology, Samuel Heilman's *Sliding to the Right*, often cited as a foundational study in this field, placed a large ultra-Orthodox community in Skokie, Illinois. In point of fact, there were, at the time, few if any real Haredim in Skokie. Skokie is home to one of America's most vital *Modern* Orthodox communities. The Modern Orthodox live traditional lives, keep the Sabbath and observe dietary laws, and center their lives on their community. But unlike Haredim, they participate fully in secular daily life. This mistake was an artefact of Heilman using written sources in place of direct field research. He likely relied on the fact that many residents of Skokie listed Yiddish as their first language on the 2000 census—but these were *non-Orthodox* Holocaust survivors, not Haredim.

Similarly, researchers who aren't deeply familiar with Orthodox communities may not distinguish practices unique to particular Hasidic groups from those that all Orthodox Jews share. For example, the generally excellent recent book *American Shtetl*, by Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers, describes the menstrual purity laws standard among all Orthodox Jews as Hasidic practices analogous to women's head shaving and men's daily use of a ritual bath *(*mikvah). In reality, only the latter two are unique to Hasidim, and neither was unique to the particular Hasidic group the book describes.

The second problem is subtle. Most research on American Haredim focuses on topics of interest to people like the researchers themselves—Western academics. (In academia, this is referred to as using *etic* categories of meaning.) Such research—on Haredi menstruation practices, reproductive

agency, the nuances of language use, race, or LGBTQ issues—is genuinely interesting. Still, it tells us almost nothing about what life looks like through Haredi eyes, and within the categories of meaning that Haredim themselves understand (what social scientists term *emic* categories). Rather, it views Haredim mainly in terms of the ways they deviate from contemporary liberal thought. The result is a completely "othered" account of Haredim. Studies that seek to understand American Haredi worldviews on *their own terms* are vanishingly rare.

To date, only a handful of academic studies have examined Haredi life in the U.S. on its own terms, uncovering the everyday patterns of culture and meaning that American Haredim claim for themselves. Thankfully, two excellent studies have appeared in the past year: the previously mentioned *American Shtetl*, on the Satmar Hasidim of Kiyras Joel, and *A Fortress in Brooklyn*, by Nathaniel Deutsch and Michael Casper, on the Satmar Hasidim in Williamsburg.

Both these books offer remarkably detailed and well-researched accounts of important aspects of Satmar life that would make sense to Satmar Hasidim themselves. *A Fortress in Brooklyn* tells a particularly complicated story without judgment or rancor. It doesn't sugarcoat complex and sometimes troubling issues in the Satmar community—such as members' sometimes unpleasant relationship with other minority neighbors and other kinds of Jews—but it also doesn't slip into the trap of minimizing or falsifying Satmar Hasidim with simplistic narratives. This is the only contemporary academic work on Hasidim that Hasidim themselves have told me that they recognize themselves in.

But the Satmars are only one Hasidic grouping among many, albeit the largest. Moreover, neither book offers a comprehensive treatment of Satmar society: One examines Satmar involvement in Williamsburg real estate while the other explores Satmar legal battles over the foundation of an autonomous Satmar town in upstate New York. For the most part, then, we are still left with giant question marks about basic features of Haredi Judaism in the United States.

To be absolutely clear: I'm not looking for academics to engage in Haredi hagiography and glorification. The Haredim do enough of that themselves, and the triumphalist Haredi attitude

toward other Jews is deeply frustrating. But the handful of works that have engaged Haredim on their own terms point the way to serious, careful research. Between othering Haredim and Haredi hagiography, there's plenty of space for real research and data, if only researchers were interested in capturing it.

What does a day in the life of an average Haredi woman or man look like? What jobs do these people hold? What activities do they engage in? What are their basic categories of thought—that is, what filters do they use for processing the world, and what topics take up their mental energy? How and when do they get married? Where do they vacation? What do their families look like? What do students actually learn all day in Haredi schools?

How about basic information about Haredi communities? How many Haredim are there in the United States? What is the quality of life for Haredi communities? What is the crime rate in Haredi communities? What do they eat, what kinds of cars do they drive, where do they live, how are their living spaces organized?

We don't even have a consensus about what it means to be a part of the Haredi community. Is it a question of which school one sends children to? Which yeshiva or rebbe one affiliates with? The neighborhood one lives in? Is being Haredi a state of mind, a worldview, a religious belief? (Or does it just involve intoning ponderously, "It is forbidden"?)

How does Haredi life differ among communities? How are Hasidim different from Yeshivish Haredim? What's the difference between Baltimore Yeshivish and Lakewood Yeshivish; how are Satmar Hasidim different from Skver, Bobov from Belz?

We simply don't know *any* of this with any specificity. Israeli academics, while frequently quite antagonistic to Haredim, have nonetheless managed to produce a robust literature that captures basic aspects of Haredi life in Israel. The Israel Democracy Institute was recently able to compile a 200-page-plus bibliography of research on Israeli Haredim. I don't think an American version would run to more than a few pages. Bits and pieces of this work have appeared here and there, but

in totality, the great myths of Haredi life are reproduced over and over, leaving most American Jews wondering, as Eli Spitzer has put it, “who the hell are these people, and why are they still here?”

The failure of academia to capture the Haredi experience using Haredi categories of meaning has led to the creation of a whole school of literature that explores the many problems of Haredi society but never bothers to understand that society as it understands itself. It’s a failure of the system, and the resulting lack of genuine comprehension creates a gap that is filled by anecdote and prejudice.

This takes us directly to the third problem with academic research on Haredim, which is the most troubling. In theory, academics should be well positioned to help the rest of us understand the Haredi phenomenon and to relate to it without resorting to simplistic tropes. But most of these academics are other Jews, and they sometimes conflate their own religious differences from Haredim with the attempt to understand them. Academic writing then serves as cover for more subjective personal and religious responses to Haredim.

Whether Haredi religious approaches and social structures are right or wrong is a fascinating religious problem from *within* religious Judaism. But it gets us no closer to answering the kinds of questions that academic study is supposed to answer. For my own part, for example, the underlying religious assumptions that underpin much of contemporary Hasidism don’t resonate with me at all. I’m not personally Hasidic, and I find the Hasidic world culturally foreign and strange, even as I can see the meaning and value it has to those who partake of it. But these personal musings have no value to anyone besides me. They are no more relevant to my endeavor to *study* Haredim than my religious differences from evangelical Christians would be to my studying American Christianity.

Some Jewish academics’ focus on their own religious differences gives them a mental license to speak about Haredim in ways that they would never speak about other people. I’ve experienced this firsthand. Whereas in education-research settings, my work is received as entirely unexceptional, academic Jewish-studies audiences have routinely responded to even the most anodyne research

I've conducted on Haredim with remarks similar to those that show up in the comments sections of the *New York Times*.

For example, I am interested in how students develop minority religious worldviews within the context of majority cultures. At a small workshop in 2019, I presented an analysis of seventh-grade English instruction in one Hasidic school that I'd observed, videotaped, and coded. In the class, the teacher tried semi-successfully to use examples from *Harry Potter* to explain dramatic arc in novels. Some of the workshop participants, all researchers of contemporary Judaism, accused me of lying.

What was so troubling about this pedestrian anecdote? Since it's a central pillar of belief among Jewish non-Haredim that Hasidim do not educate their children, including in basic English literacy, suggesting that a Hasidic school was teaching the concept of dramatic arc (with *Harry Potter* no less!) apparently contradicted convictions these colleagues held so firmly that they responded not with curiosity but with anger and groundless accusations. If your data complicates "common knowledge" about Haredim, you're either misinformed or in the pocket of the rabbis (something I've likewise been accused of).

Anytime that I suggest that there is something interesting or compelling about Haredi education, some of my audience are shocked and outraged. They literally can't believe that I don't apply a reflexively negative lens to Haredim and Haredi institutions and practices. Protests that I am not interested in *either* the goodness or badness of Haredim, but in simply understanding how their education works, are met with mute incomprehension. It doesn't seem to strike such listeners that it is outrageous to stereotype and vilify the members of an entire community this way. The sad truth is that these same colleagues would be horrified by speech like this about any other minority group—and rightly so.

This prejudice doesn't just harm Haredim; it can also lead to bizarre academic results. Chaya Nove, a linguist and postdoctoral scholar at Berkeley—who also happens to be the practicing member of the Hasidic Satmar community I mentioned above—has noted that the ideological anti-religiosity

of Yiddish linguists had led to the complete erasure of Hasidic Yiddish from empirical linguistic studies of Yiddish. (Thankfully, since her article on this matter appeared in 2018, research on this subject has spiked.) The absurdity of this decades-long dearth of research on the only communities in the world in which Yiddish remains a living language can be understood only in light of the othering of Hasidim that informs much contemporary academic Jewish research.

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If academics have failed to capture Haredi life as it really is, journalists have actively distorted it in more pernicious ways.

Claims made in the mainstream media about other minority groups are uniformly backed by reams of data, contextualized six ways to Sunday, and, if they are negative, framed as cautiously and with as much explanatory context as possible. Not in this case.

For example, everyone knows that Haredi leaders keep Haredim deliberately uneducated, right? That's the starting point of the *New York Times* hit piece, inspired by the massive media campaign run by ex-Hasidic activists who want the government to regulate Haredi schools. This half-a-million-dollar-a-year crusade has included the *New York Times*, "documentaries," op-eds in major outlets, and massive lobbying of public officials to intervene in these schools. But having spent more than 15 years doing research in Haredi schools, I recognize the campaign's characterization of them as deeply misleading. To my knowledge, none of the journalists reporting on this fight has directly entered these schools (with one exception) or sought to understand how they function. Nor have they bothered to interview the more than 100,000 parents who pay thousands of dollars a year to send their children to Haredi schools precisely *because of* the education they receive there.

Media coverage is driven by activists, Twitter (but I repeat myself), academics who have no direct experience with Haredi education, and the certainty of dogmatic refrains about what "everybody knows." In fact, while Haredim may not engage in much secular pop culture, they are far from ignorant or unschooled—something that is completely obscured by media coverage.

Similarly, these articles state without qualification that New York City and state politicians don't try to appeal to Haredim but rather seek to "pander." For example, when the executive director of Common Cause New York attacked then–mayoral candidate Andrew Yang for defending New York yeshivas from their critics, she described him as "pandering to an extremist bloc."

Putting aside the characterization of Haredim as extremist, another troubling presumption underlying the "pandering" trope is that everyone knows that, in their ignorance, the Haredi masses will do what their leaders tell them. This is supposedly why they form an indivisible bloc of voters worthy of a politician's courtship. Anyone who has spent more than 10 seconds in a Haredi community knows full well that Haredim are incredibly fractious, skeptical of authority, and don't always simply follow marching orders. In fact, like everyone else, they vote for the candidates who support issues that are important to them.

And when it comes to Haredi communities' supposed poverty, everyone knows they are all on welfare. Haredim are a drain on city and state resources, sucking up funds with their deliberate ignorance—right? Actually, the *Times'* assertions notwithstanding, we have no idea whether Haredim, *on the whole*, are poorer than other groups in New York State. (And if they were, wouldn't they deserve sympathy and help like everyone else?) Haredi communities certainly don't feature the sorts of markers that typically indicate poverty. They mainly comprise stable, two-parent families and have extremely low levels of violent crime. Claims about this subject often gloss over the extremely large family size in Hasidic communities, which often qualifies Hasidim for government benefits even when they earn salaries that are above average.

Among Hasidim, even individuals who earn low salaries frequently do so for ideological rather than educational reasons. My interviews with school principals have revealed a strong anti-elitist ethos when it comes to the occupations their students might pursue after graduation. Community members value labor, blue-collar or otherwise. Because spiritual meaning comes from Judaism and not work, Hasidim do not care whether someone is an accountant or a car mechanic, as long as he is able to pay his bills. There are very few families in Hasidic communities whose adult members simply don't work at all, as opposed to the common portrayal of a world in which men sit studying

Talmud all day for the balance of their lives. My own data on the occupations of fathers of students in a school belonging to the Satmar Hasidic group, for example, demonstrated a male populace that was almost entirely employed. Fewer than 3 percent of the fathers had no occupation listed in school records (which in itself doesn't mean they weren't employed; school records in Hasidic schools are often spotty at best, and some parents simply refuse to list their occupations).

Journalistic accounts of Haredim tend to fall into a handful of categories. It is rare to find an article that is not about some claimed Haredi malfeasance, an account of rebels within the community, or the accounts of those who have left the community. A recent Times of Israel article about Frida Vizel, an ex-Hasid who gives tours of the Satmar community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, notes that "those hoping to hear any judgment of the Hasidic community will leave Vizel's tour very disappointed. Her goal is simply to educate outsiders about the Hasidic lifestyle and the reasons behind the community's insular nature." The journalistic presumption here is that any overview of Hasidic life will be negative, *and that this is what visitors are hoping* for; in this context, Vizel's lack of judgmentalism stands out as curious.

Benign treatment is so unusual that a completely anodyne Buzzfeed article in 2019, "America's Orthodox Jews Are Selling a Ton of the Products You Buy on Amazon," produced a flood of appreciative comments from Haredim. The article said nothing positive about Haredim—it simply portrayed an interesting phenomenon within Haredi society (the robust presence of Haredim running businesses through Amazon Marketplace). But because it wasn't an account of malfeasance or criticism from ex-community members, it was greeted with relief and joy.

But these are the rare exceptions. It is precisely such banality that is missing from most accounts of Haredim, replaced by either faux nostalgia, outrage, or suspicion. From ex-Hasidim to the Modern Orthodox to those cultural New York Jews for whom Judaism is Zabar's and Chinese food on Christmas, explanations for the very existence of Haredim range from conspiracy theories to bewilderment. As one Hassid plaintively said to me just after the *Times*' yeshiva article came out, "I just want people to treat me like a normal person. They treat us like we're aliens."

We think of the medieval blood libel as the purest example of Jew hatred prior to the Nazis, but how did those blood libels seem to those who believed them? They thought the Jews were killing babies! *Every* manifestation of Jew-hatred throughout history has justified itself on the basis of the alleged crimes of the Jews, and a shockingly large percentage of them were supported by the accusations of other Jews. From medieval disputations and Talmud burnings, to Enlightenment Jewish critics of Hasidim, other Jews have often framed their more traditionalist brethren as a problem to be solved—usually through state or religious coercion.

The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment—a key intellectual movement that applied liberal rationalist ideas to the folkways of Jewish life in Europe in the late-18th century and onward into the 19th—provides the best parallel to, and historical roots of, our current situation. While today's Haredim differ in many ways from their 19th-century counterparts, today's academics, journalists, and activists often sound much like the proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment, the maskilim. In 1816 the maskil Josef Perl wrote a tract to the Austrian authorities he called "On the Nature of the Hasidic Sect" in which he explained (falsely, as it turns out) that the Hasidim are all impoverished, their Rebbes all frauds, and that they plot against good Christians and the state on a regular basis. In 1797, the maskil Jacques Calmanson wrote about Hasidism: "It should undoubtably be expected that the authorities will undertake immediate and effective measures to put a check on the further spread of such a dangerous sect.… Why should not the country in which this reptile breeds, and not only Jews, fear its ferocity."

Marcin Wodzinski, a leading scholar of Hasidism, has demonstrated at length the degree to which such maskilik accounts of the Hasidim were built on ignorance and prejudice. For one thing, he shows that while maskilim assumed that all Hasidim were poor, the hasidim were perfectly well-off. Yet maskilic claims still hold tremendous weight in the narratives told about Hasidim (and other Haredim) to this day: ideas about all-powerful rabbis who control the ignorant masses, incredible Hasidic poverty and the movement's glorification of indolence, Hasidic anti-Christian prejudice and xenophobia. All these, and more, originate with the maskilim, are pervasive today, and were deeply flawed even at the time of their original writing.

Wodzinski describes the maskilic attitude in terms that need little adjustment to fit our current age:

> Similarly reprehensible was aversion to modern, secular science, which, in the opinion of the maskilim, was essential to dragging the Jewish people out of a state of civilizational backwardness. But the most important accusations focused on the most fundamental issues of supposed Hasidic obscurantism, which we can see to mean the argument around the bourgeois ethos and lifestyle, which Hasidism in fact rejected and the maskilim saw to be the only real ones.

Or, as one contemporary ex-Hasid complained, "I didn't even know who the Beatles were!"

The Haredi rejection of contemporary cultural mores sticks in the craw of many enlightened Jews. Like the maskilim, they frame Haredi life in ways that are not necessarily anti-Semitic themselves, but that can certainly be used to *justify* anti-Semitism of the worst kind.

This all has real-world consequences. Society's lack of knowledge about Haredim and its lack of empathy for them make for a deadly brew. Haredim in the New York area have been subject to near-constant anti-Semitic attacks over the past few years, ranging from physical assaults to swastikas on buses to slurs hurled at little children to broken windows and defaced schools. But hardly any of these attacks have been more than a blip on the local news. It may come as a surprise to those outside the Haredi community to know that a Haredi attack has occurred nearly weekly — sometimes even daily—over the past two years.

Haredim are the most visibly Jewish Jews. They are also the last Jews to resist the adoption of a purely Western, enlightened worldview. The anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin has described them as being *racialized* in ways other Jews currently aren't, "the result not only of prejudice against them but also as the result of a certain refusal of whiteness on their own part." Even—no, *especially*—other Jews code Haredim as deviant, dangerous, and threatening. Thus, the unending hate directed at Haredim is ignored. Until they are actually slaughtered, as they were almost three years ago in a Jersey City supermarket, no sympathy (and certainly no empathy) is offered for the hate directed their way. Nobody even notices. An anti-Semitic mass rampage in Lakewood, New Jersey, in April that left people in critical condition barely made the local news.

Even after the Jersey City attack, a member of the Jersey City government opined that the Haredim had it coming to them.

Why does this community provoke so much outrage?

Usually, the answer I receive is that they deserve it. They really are that bad.

Everyone knows.