Sociology Insights

COVID-19, Information Dissemination, and Social Change in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Society

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Abstract

COVID-19 has caused profound changes in society. The ultra-orthodox Jewish community, renown for its conservatism, has also been influenced by COVID-19, and its social norms have been changing. Bringing COVID-19 information and instructions to this segment of society meant new understanding and using different methods. Medical response is not only in the clinic and hospital. It must also include bringing behavioral messages to the public.

Keywords: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Ultra-orthodox Jewry

Introduction

COVID-19 has caused profound changes in society. Standards of hygiene have changed. Working from home appears to be more than a passing fad. Consumer preferences have increasingly shifted to online shopping. The ultra-orthodox Jewish community, renown for its conservatism, has also been influenced by COVID-19, and its social norms have been changing.

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel there was a continuous need to sensitize the population to the nature of the pandemic and frequently update them on changes in behavioral regulations. For most Israeli citizens this meant televised newscasts, radio broadcasts, Internet messages, and notices placed in daily newspapers. There were, of course, numerous problems. Netanya, for example, has numerous French-speaking residents. Thus, it was necessary to use the French press to circulate updates [1].

The Israeli ultra-orthodox population presented unique challenges for information dissemination, acceptance, and compliance. In the typical ultra-orthodox home secular information and entertainment sources are excluded in favor of self-censored religious media designed to insulate the community from undesirable outside influence. Ultra-orthodox newspapers tend to be shorter and understandably are focused on events affecting the community, but as the COVID-19 pandemic increased, there was a significant spike in general interest. Not satisfied by usual sources, bringing COVID-19 information and instructions to this segment of society not only meant using different methods; it also generated changes in society.

It can be argued that ultra-orthodox media, given their religious and cultural self-censorship, do not challenge pre-conceptions and stereotypes, but act to sustain them. It can also be argued that negative news coverage of drafting into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), a major political issue with the ultra-orthodox, is a major contribution to dislike and distrust of the army. A reciprocal implication is that IDF soldiers have nurtured distrust and dislike for the ultra-orthodox. This study examines the interactions of the two groups in the COVID-19 response and the changes that were engendered.

The two largest ultra-orthodox centers in Israel are Bnei Braq and specific neighborhoods in Jerusalem, the main focusses of this study. Several other ultra-orthodox areas, however, are also included.

General Overview

According to the Israel Democracy Institute [2]. "The ultra-Orthodox population [in Israel] is relatively young, and in 2018 it numbered over one million between ages 0-19 (58%) compared to 30% among Jews who are not ultra-Orthodox." A direct implication is that due to age, significantly fewer ultra-orthodox Jews can be considered potential newspaper readers than their non-ultra-orthodox counterparts. Although older teens are theoretically potential readers, cultural norms dictate that their primary news source tends to be Word of Mouth (WOM), either within the family or through out-of-the-home conversations.

In 2017 114,000 ultra-Orthodox men attended yeshivas and kollelim (religious seminaries) [2]. This very significant part of the ultra-orthodox population is apt not to be overly exposed to any direct media source, since religious study and observance dominate the daily schedule. When all schooling --- religious and secular, adult and youth --- was shuttered, this meant profound disruptions and change routines for everyone.

Statistics

Even as this study is being prepared, general statistics of the population in Israel are continuously changing. Representative national figures for March 2020 aSre provided by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics.

National population: 9.1762 million. The number for the same period ten years before was 7,6951 million. As the population increased, localities had to augment not only basic daily services, but also revise emergency plans to include a new population not only in numbers but in many cases for new social diversity.

COVID-19 presented a definite challenge. According to Israel Ministry of Health, as of 14 May 2020 COVID-19 cases included: fatalities 264, on respirators 52, serious 61, moderate 48, light 3,879. (These numbers do not include asymptomatic infections that can be hard to detect. Respirators are a special category; although they do imply seriousness, the range varies from treatable to unknown further treatment.)

There are no reliable statistics regarding ultra-orthodox infection, and numbers range from 33% to 70% of all cases. After all, hospitals do not register patients according to religious preference. The reports come from various secular newspapers that published numbers without any reliable sources, i.e, rather unsubstantiated estimations. (A direct byproduct was playing on popular prejudice.)

Another key factor in understanding the relatively high rate of ultra-orthodox COVID-19 infection is in intersectionality [3], or multi-functional analysis. Instead of postulating factors such as age, gender, etc., a more effective framework would be crowding --- in housing, schools, dormitories, and prayer halls, all superimposed on aspects of information dissemination and reception. A preliminary conclusion would be that crowded conditions increased infection, which was aggravated by faulty information reception and in many cases rejection (because of initial rabbinic policy) rather than reception.

Diverse Population within Religious Framework

There is no standard definition of ultra-orthodox Jews. A flexible working definition can be "those for whom religious study and strict observance are central to their goals and lifestyle." This leaves extensive leeway to accommodate the vast variations present in the ultra-orthodox community. There are Jews of Western (Ashkenazi) and Eastern (Sephardic) roots. Superimposed on the former group are chassidic and non-chassidic groups, each divided into numerous sub-groups; the latter tend to form groups representing their specific foreign national origins, but there is a certain spillover, particularly into certain chassidic groups. Important for this study is that there are different rabbinic authorities who are considered ultimate decision makers by their followers (rather than the Israel Chief Rabbinate that does not play a decisive role for the ultra-orthodox).

A key factor in ultra-orthodox society is the dominant role played by religious leadership. In cases of Chassidic communities that means the Rebbe of their particular sect (of which there are many); non-Chassidic Jews of Western origin look to a particular distinguished leader or the head of a yeshiva. Local synagogue rabbis will not contradict higher authorities. The ultra-orthodox Jews of Eastern and North African origin have their own leaders. The decisions of these personalities will almost always take precedence over government instructions.

At the highest levels of ultra-orthodox rabbinic leadership there is some degree of consistency in decisions (with noted exceptions).

A comparison between the populations of Jerusalem and Bnei Braq is important. Jerusalem has a wide variety of cultures in it population. There are Moslems and Christians of various sects. The Jewish population ranges from the adamantly secular to the vociferously ultra-orthodox. Within the ultra-orthodox segment there are significant groups (if not in numbers then in the publicity generated by their actions) that preclude any total rabbinic consensus.

Bnei Braq is much less diversified, and there is usually a unified position of the three or four leading rabbis. Any differences of opinion, however slight, are sometimes magnified in the media to generate "news" The difference between these two cities highlights the procedures and difficulties, sometimes requiring time and delay in gaining ultra-orthodox acquiescence to COVID-19 regulations and recommendations.

The chain of information flow for decision making is from party members on the Bnei Braq City Council, who report on issues under discussion to their respective rabbinic leaders, who then formulate decisions. In discussions during the initial process rabbinic suggests and input reach the City Council through the members associated with the various parties.

Restrictions

COVID-19 restrictions were mandated by the government in televised addresses with the outlines described by the prime minister accompanied by other government officials. The basic purpose was not only to list response measures, but also to impress upon the pubic the severity of the situation and prepare citizens psychologically for changes, for better or worse, in the pandemic response. The ultra-orthodox community, by and large, does not own televisions, so the impact of the prime minister's speeches were reduced to newspaper accounts and WOM.

For many ultra-orthodox the ultimate decision in compliance is not government dictates, but rather rabbinical decisions. This can be seen in the government order to close schools, which

was initially rejected by rabbinic leadership in Bnei Braq [4]. (Police issued warning notices for non-compliance.)

If secular media reports are accurate, this is an example of difficulties of information dissemination in the ultra-orthodox community. A prominent report states, "Just moments before he made this ruling, he [a leading Bnei Braq rabbinic authority] had not actually heard about the coronavirus epidemic at all [5]." This also highlights government inadequacy in not contacting the most prominent ultra-orthodox leader. A more analytical approach says that such government decision is a very basic threat to rabbinic authority and the importance of learning at the center of ultra-orthodox life [6].

Methods

The language of information delivered over municipal loudspeakers was exclusively in Hebrew in Jewish Jerusalem, Bnei Braq, and Elad (an ultra-orthodox city near Bnei Braq). Residents who were questioned remembered no leaflets being inserted into home letterboxes. In contrast, privately funded loudspeakers in Jerusalem ultra-orthodox neighborhoods (Maalot Dafna, Beis Yisroel, Mea Shearim, Geula, Romema) use Yiddish quite frequently, albeit for funeral announcements. Yiddish is spoken as a primary language much less frequently in Bnei Braq, but in the case of a missing child (13 May 2020) loudspeakers made announcements in both Hebrew and Yiddish. In Bnei Braq there was a conscious decision not to make announcements in Yiddish, since most residents do speak Hebrew, and the city could not cope with the various Yiddish dialects (Nogelblatt, 2020).

There are large numbers of English speakers in the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Har Nof and Ramot, yet city loudspeakers were again in Hebrew only. (Announcements by the Jerusalem Municipality in Arab neighborhoods were in Arabic.)

In contrast in London (UK) there was reliance was on written material distributed in hardcopy and computer download in English [7] and numerous foreign languages. Neither Hebrew nor Yiddish was routinely available, but interpreter services were available.

The pre-COVID-19 ultra-orthodox use of computers in Israel was growing, but slowly, "As of 2017, 54% of the ultra-Orthodox over the age of 20 reported using a computer, compared with only 44% in 2007 [2]." This compares with 79% of the general population. The ultra-orthodox statistic is misleading, since a disproportionate number of immigrants and their first-generation Israeli ultra-orthodox families (Ancis, 2004) use computers. Many use computers only in the workplace. Even when taking the statistics at face value, limited computer access complicates information dissemination.

COVID-19 has had a definite influence on computer usage. An Internet survey conducted by Kanter Media in early April 2020 found that 8% of users were new. 40% of ultra-orthodox Internet surfers accessed general (secular) news providers, and 25% accessed social media. Work habits changed, with 12% of users spent some 5 hours per day working on a computer

at home. Bezeq, an Internet provider, noted an 8% increase in new ultra-orthodox users, 3 times as many as pre-COVID-19 [3].

It is not easy to determine exactly where the ultra-orthodox users surf the Internet, since online entertainment is frowned upon, and answers to questions of use cannot necessarily be trusted [8], but COVID-19 was a game changer. This plays into the general observation that those who use the Web frequently for entertainment purposes are less likely to feel efficacious about their potential role in the democratic process and also knew less about facts relevant to current events [9], although this is quietly changing. The direct implication is that ultra-orthodox surfers using a computer strictly for work purposes or discretely for games or entertainment are less likely to use it for secular news sources, probably with the prime exception of COVID-19 issues. YouTube has played a significant instructive role in COVID-19 [10], but the number of ultra-orthodox users is probably still disproportionately low.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of online ultra-orthodox newspapers. These e-publications tend to resemble traditional print newspapers in content and do not really widen perspectives (for example, regarding COVID-19). A general rule in newspaper coverage is that newspapers print what their readers want to hear (often strengthening existing stereotypes), and ultra-orthodox newspapers online or printed are no different [11].

Municipalities

Different municipalities have taken different approaches handling COVID-19 in their ultra-orthodox communities. For example, in Ashdod, a city of more than 225,000 residents, the ultra-orthodox are centered in three neighborhoods [12]. At least one of the major ultra-orthodox rabbinic groups played no prominent role.

Elad (El'ad) is a predominately ultra-orthodox city with 47,866 inhabitants of whom about 60% are minors. The number of households is about 8,000, usually unconnected to new media. The municipality routinely deals with the problem of notifications (not necessarily of an emergency nature) by pasting notices on billboards and through a network of pre-recorded telephone messages sent to city residents [13]. Cars with loudspeakers broadcasting COVID-19 messages traveled through the streets.

As soon as reports were received regarding the spread of COVID-19 outside China, the mayor of Elad prepared contingency protective measures even before he was instructed to do so by the Ministry of Health [14]. His put the city in a better position to respond quickly when it became necessary.

Information reliability

"False information about the [COVID-19] pandemic is rampant [15]." As the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) advises, it runs… "an awareness campaign about the risks of incorrect and false information regarding the Coronavirus pandemic. … Double check information with

trusted sources such as WHO and national health authorities. [16]" This is certainly sound advice, however its application is problematic particularly in an ultra-orthodox context.

Information reliability in running schools and yeshivot is straight-forward. Principals of ultra-orthodox schools have to be in contact with "reliable sources" as they run their institutions. That means of course, accurate receipt of information and instruction from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, but there is a "catch." Although these principals cannot violate government rules, their ultimate decision is always coordinated at the rabbinic level, with which they are routinely in direct personal contact as questions arise. Be instructions right or wrong, bureaucracy dictates this this is the procedure that must be followed.

Information and instructions outside the education framework was problematic. The head of the National Association of Municipal Security Officers complained that there were too many national offices authorized to issue guidelines and instructions. In Bnei Baq he mayor was the sole ultimate authority for all local matters (Nogelblatt, 2020).

There are several ostensibly reliable sources of unreliable news regarding COVID-19. The first cause of unreliability is that truths change. There is much that we do not know about COVID-19, and we are essentially in the midst of a learning process. What was true yesterday is often not true today, so much has to be unlearned and changed. There are also varied professional opinions about what should be done. Are filters in masks necessary? Should one wear gloves? How long does contamination remain in a room? How long does the virus remain in the air? Thus, there are real questions about the definition of reliable information.

In many ways COVID-19 is an "infodemic" [17] or a deluge of information. In this case the information can be sourced to government pronouncements, traditional press, social media, and WOM. Sorting out fake news from reliable content is a difficult task, including for the ultra-orthodox community if for no reason other than is sheer amount.

The higher political level has produced numerous questionable if not totally inaccurate statements about COVID-19 (Paz, 2020). It can be argued that some statements are designed to quell public fears, while others are unfounded or populist announcements. Some announcements by government officials have been shown to be patently uninformed and wrong. An example is the American president's touting of hydroxychloroquine as effective against COVID-19. The US FDA revoked its temporary approval, noting that it is ineffective and even can cause further cardiac problems (FDA, 2020) In any case one must distinguish between political and professional pronouncements. If information is sufficiently piquant, it can be spread virally and amplified by WOM without critical examination.

Information Transfer: Word of Mouth (WOM and e-WOM)

The receipt and transfer of information in an ultra-orthodox community differ from the secular world. WOM has various parameters.

Not everyone hears loudspeakers. Not everyone has Internet access, reads newspapers, nor listens to radio. Much information is spread by Word of Mouth (WOM) --- if not the information itself, then certainly its evaluation.

WOM is more complicated than a father coming home and telling his family about new COVID-19 instructions. And, not all WOM is a dry repetition of government decisions. COVID-19 has been a frequent subject of discussion in all segments of society. People talk about rules, their opinion of the rules, and stories about people who break the rules --- stories that often go viral. There is extensive literature regarding WOM, particularly as it relates to marketing [18] and accuracy of repetition.

Accuracy in repeating information to others is important, but there are other aspects that have to be take into consideration. It is hard to quantify factors such as speaker intonation, skepticism, emphasis, or enthusiasm, all of which convey a message as strong as the verbatim words.

In the consumer world WOM is considered more convincing than traditional formal media such as television, radio, and newspapers that are viewed as tools of the advertiser. Many companies, therefore, try to use their traditional advertising to generate positive WOM messages. COVID-19 announcements are, in every respect, advertising. Many notices are designed to generate WOM circulation --- "no fatalities," "the hospital closed its corona until because there were no patients…" One bottom line of such messages is to reinforce the impression that government policies are effective (and political leaders know what they are doing). When messages are written, WOM repetition should be a primary goal.

In theory news from people whose opinions one trusts should be the most often repeated, but more often it is he "juiciest" story that goes viral even in ultra-orthodox circles. On 12-13 May 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, a six-year-old ultra-orthodox boy was declared missing [19]. WOM spread theories in Bnei Braq, triggered by loudspeakers. Discussions overheard in the streets were rampant (personal observation) even after the boy was fortunately discovered asleep under his bed. A tangential ramification was credit for the searching organizations --- Shomrim, Ichud Hatzalah, Hatzalah Gush Dan, and ZAKA. (Notice absence of the Israel Police.)

e-WOM is a relatively new phenomenon with the rise of computer-based digital communications. Increased use of social media in the wake of COVID-19 means increased exposure to e-WOM. The scenario is quite simple: "A" posts an article, "B, C, ad D" comment. "E" reads the initial article, sees he comments, is convinced of the contents, and generates WOM or e-WOM with confidence. This works in both the secular and ultra-orthodox worlds.

Restriction Enforcement

Defunding the police has become a popular (if undefined) term

currently bandied about to symbolize more effect policing at lower financial cost. In 2014-2015 several Israeli cities including Bnei Braq addressed this issue by establishing the Civil Guard, in which police officers and municipal inspectors ran joint patrols with municipalities sharing part of the financial burden. Only those policemen with extensive local experience were chosen for the assignment, thus sensitivity to neighborhood needs was maintained.

COVID-19 required special legislation widening the authority of the two partners in the patrols. Estimates for Bnei Braq suggested that the patrols would issue some 2000 citations per day. During the first three days of enforcement warnings were issued. Thereafter no more than 200 citations were needed due to increased compliance (Nogelblatt, 2020).

Media Coverage

Accuracy in news reporting is a cardinal rule in journalism, and it is an excellent measure by which to evaluate a newspaper or magazine. Facts alone, however, are an insufficient yardstick of reliability. They must be presented in proportion and in context to prevent distortion. Recent coverage in the secular media of COVID-19 of Bnei Braq and other Israel ultra-orthodox centers highlights this issue.

A common statistic bandied about is that a Health Center survey shows 38% of Bnei Braq's population is probably infected with Coronavirus. The statistic was taken out of context. The Center quickly emphasized that 38% of those who claimed symptoms and were examined did have the virus. Despite the clarification, 38% was frequently cited in the popular press. The true projected number, frequently ignored, was between 10% and 11%. Statistics also remain in memory. What may have been true a week or two ago may not be relevant today, but the impact can live on even though relevancy is dead.

Many media reports thrive on sensationalism. As the adage goes, "Dog bites man is not news; man bites dog is news." 38% is exceptional high, and it plays on sensationalism, so it makes catchy headlines. Repeated often, it nurtured an underlying secular distrust (if not dislike) of the ultra-orthodox. The hysteric fear of infestation and animosity towards ultra-orthodox prompted the neighboring Ramat Gan Municipality to erect fences to prevent Bnei Braq residents from entering. The fences were quickly ruled illegal and dismantled, but media coverage of the removal was scant and low key.

As in the example of "man bites dog," abiding by the law is not news, but any mis-step begs for coverage, particularly when there is a lack of real news. Acting in accordance with government instructions is not news. When one group or another violates those instructions, it is news, albeit totally blown out of proportion by reporters looking for a "story."

In many ways ultra-orthodox news coverage differs from secular practice. The ultra-orthodox tend to be non-adversarial, stressing affairs in their own circles. Main news sources are the press officers of cities with large ultra-orthodox populations. They tend not to enter into controversy with those press officers and endanger future co-operation (Nogelblatt, 2020).

Who enforces government instructions? There is a serious misunderstanding that has been encountered. The army sent numerous cars and jeeps equipped with loudspeakers through city streets, notifying all who listen what are the up-to-date rules. The threat of non-compliance was a monetary fine. The civilian guard, however, knows the population and took a totally different tact. Upon spotting an "illegal" outdoor minyan outside our apartment, an inspector announced over his loudspeaker, "Daven (pray) nicely, but remember to keep a two meter distance."

During the intermediate days of the Passover holiday the city sent trucks with music and entertainers into the neighborhoods. Periodically they would stop outside buildings to give a performance. When a crowd started to gather outside the building where I am living, the public announcement was simple, "Disperse or we stop the performance and move on." No fines, but a "threat" if you want to call it that.

The secular media at large not only blow infractions out of proportion. They have given heavy coverage to their own agenda --- government support provided to Bnei Braq. The army distributed thousands of meals with the help of civilian volunteers. They knocked on doors of the elderly to inquire about the well-being of the elderly. All true. All factual. But out of proportion, as though they were the only ones at work. No mention in the main televised news programs was made of the many Bnei Braq charity organizations busy helping people. No mention was made of the Municipality's distribution of games and toys to keep children busy. Rather than understand and praise untold efforts to continue religious learning (a prime ultra-orthodox value), great effort was made to find violations of government dictates.

There will be many lessons to be learnt from the COVID-19 response. One blatant lesson is that "Just the facts" is not enough in journalism unless they are in context, in proportion, and without a preconceived agenda.

IDF and NGO Assistance

Much of the secular press stressed the role of the IDF in distributing food packages in ultra-orthodox areas. This fit in with a reporting bias stressing the roles played by government agencies [20]. Overlooked, however was the fact that in Elad, for example, no fewer than 16 NGOs were involved in the COVID-19 response, not including 6 volunteers who ran an entertainment truck to occupy local children. (Similar trucks were run in other cities as well.) Three private companies provided toys and games to occupy youth and the elderly [13].

The food packages distributed by the IDF met the strict kashrut standards of the ultra-orthodox. This is another example of changing attitudes. Although many ultra-orthodox harbor negative feelings about the IDF, all food package were welcomed by the recipients, and no complaints were registered [14].

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Mental Health

Research from China reports that nearly 40.4% of youth surveyed had a tendency to have psychological problems during the pandemic. Restless and sleep problems were fond with numerous children in a study conducted by an Italian pediatric hospital (Gaslini, 2020). There is no reason to think that ultra-orthodox children reacted differently Even those youth not directly infected with COVID-19 were negatively influenced by the pandemic [21]. Another of the contributing factors is boredom [22], if not in strict quarantine, then certainly in lockdown with severe limitations on activity outside the house.

The routine of ultra-orthodox children, particularly boys, centers around education and for older boys also prayer three times a day. During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the full ramifications and severity of the virus were still not understood, there was a pronounced refusal to close ultra-orthodox religious schools. When all schools were finally closed, efforts were made to provide "learning by telephone," but particularly for younger children this was a less than effective measure. A ten year old boy cannot really replace seven or eight hours in a classroom with a 30 minute telephone call. In many cases this led to lack of a daily framework, boredom, and ensuing psychological problems.

With schools closed there was no possibility of psychological intervention within the educational framework (Caldwell, 2019). In many ways the educational frame is appropriate to treat children, since it is cognizant of their cultural needs [23].

To occupy younger ultra-orthodox children a Bnei Braq company, Alphabeta, produced a coloring book with pictures relating to COVID-19 --- a boy in protective isolation, a shuttered synagogue, people wearing masks, praying from balconies. The pictures were a subtle reinforcement of proper COVID-19 behavior in an ultra-orthodox setting far from routine.

The Bnei Braq Municipality worked on a model of collective responsibility in deciding when children should return to school. There were early private attempts to open certain grades, but the majority of children stayed home, and telephone lessons also continued. On 13 May 2020 a meeting was convened by Mayor Avraham Rubinstein and attended by the broadest spectrum of city officials heading departments dealing with COVID-19 and education. The mayor's spokesperson explained that pre-school children in city-run schools could return after the city had consulted and received instructions from rabbis and leading rabbinic figures (מאתהבו לארשי ילודג ןנברו ןנרמ תויחנהל), although the final decision was left in each case to the discretion of the parents (Levin, 2020). The rabbinic decision came about through prior discussions and was presented to the forum as a fact; etiquette dictates that such decisions should not be challenged. The apparent circumvention by the municipality was not to make attendance mandatory.

With the strong emphasis on distancing in its many facets (e.g., avoiding crowds, distance learning, two meter separation between individuals), problems of exiting emerged, many with psychological ramifications. One teacher reported more students wanted telephone lessons than came to class even when schools were officially opened. One parent was concerned that her son feared going outside for any reason. As schools reopened students consulted with each other by telephone whether to return or not; most decided to remain at home. Rabbinic authorities issued no definitive instructions, leaving decisions in the hands of parents. In short, there was no clear exiting policy dealing with psychological issues.

Dealing with depression and anxiety with schools closed essentially eliminated the most obvious avenue of treatment. Psychological intervention cannot be effective from afar, particularly when parents, themselves, suffered symptoms. Some children returned to schools, but many were reluctant. Depression and anxiety are not black and white, on-or-off traits. The mechanisms can be complex. Sometimes these behaviors come to the forefront, but sometime they are residual or hidden [24], still existent but obfuscated by denial or other factors, since they are generally perceived as negative. Given the varying severity of the problem, the person in question can sent out mixed signals regarding his psychological health. Treatment can be particularly difficult when there is no access to professionals. Isolation is a known reason for increased anxiety and depression not only in children but also in older adults [25]. A general assessment is always needed.

COVID-19 isolation and anxiety or depression cannot be examined in a vacuum. Other existent problems, such as personal health issues or family situation, can be contributing factors to problems.

From an administrative perspective exiting produced uncertainties and inconsistencies. Beis Midrash Elyon in Bnei Braq re-opened on condition that boys not leave the building and its dormitory space for a month. At the same time the head of Ponevezh Yeshiva, Rav Yaacov Edelstein, decided not to have in-building learning and to continue with telephone arrangements.

Another by-product of COVID-19, bordering between mental and physic health, is that 36% of smokers increased their cigarette usage, although some did stop smoking [26]. This was viewed as a tangential issue that was not openly addressed in the ultra-orthodox community [27], where smoking is officially frowned upon [28-32].

Conclusions

The ultra-orthodox are a traditional community in many ways isolated from Israeli society at large. In many ways they show traits and behavior similar to other insular groups such as the Amish, even though their large size shows that there are internal differences particular in the political stream. The circumstances of COVID-19 showed some changes in society.

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