Civic Engagement of Students from Minority Groups: The Case of Ultra-Orthodox Students and Communities in Jerusalem

Maya Vardi, Zvika Orr, and Adi Finkelstein

Introduction

In the past few decades, higher education institutions have developed many programs that promote student engagement in the community, as part of a broader international trend to strengthen academia's civic engagement. This trend is often seen as a return to academia's traditional roles in advancing democratic values and fundamental social goals (Annette, 2005; Boyer, 1996; Butin, 2010; Ehrlich, 2000; Harkavy, 2006). Studies have also found that students' community engagement has a positive impact on students' academic achievements, self-confidence, and cognitive and leadership skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 2006). Yet, there are some serious challenges in establishing reciprocal campus-community partnerships that would successfully contend with discrepancies in privilege and power between universities

M. Vardi (✉) • Z. Orr • A. Finkelstein
Department of Nursing, Jerusalem College of Technology, Jerusalem, Israel
e-mail: maya.vardi@mail.huji.ac.il; orr@g.jct.ac.il; afinkels@g.jct.ac.il

and disadvantaged communities. Many collaborations between the academy and the community are driven by the former's need to train professionals by giving them practical experience that helps them improve their professional and technical abilities. In such cases, there is a risk that collaborations between the academy and the community could become unequal, unilateral and asymmetrical, addressing only the academy's needs.

Studies that have examined the benefits of community engagement programs to student participants, as well as the difficulties involved in forming these partnerships, have rarely considered the fact that students come from different backgrounds. Initial studies have shown that community engagement programs are especially meaningful for minority students or students that come from groups that are underrepresented in academia (Golan, Rosenfeld & Orr, 2017; Kallus & Shamur, 2015; Markovich & Masry-Herzalla, 2017; Maruyama et al., 2017).

This research is dedicated to one such group—ultra-orthodox and orthodox Jewish students who studied at the *Jerusalem College of Technology—Lev Academic Center (JCT)* and were enrolled in a community engagement program—*"Lev Bakehila" (Lev in the Community)* that aims to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities in ultra-orthodox communities. The fact that ultra-orthodox students are pursuing higher education is a new phenomenon in Israel, one that has become the subject of intense controversy in ultra-orthodox society and that is condemned by leading rabbis. At the same time, recent adaptations of academic settings to the needs of ultra-orthodox students have been met with fierce opposition by secular academics.

By using quantitative and qualitative methods, we gathered data from questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to examine the different ways the students understand their work with disadvantaged individuals and communities, and how the participation in the program affected them in light of their position as a minority in Israeli society and the secular-orthodox conflictual social context in which they operated. Thus, the study seeks to explore the new field of civic engagement programs geared toward ultra-orthodox and orthodox students and discuss the challenges and opportunities that come up when ultra-orthodox and orthodox students volunteer in their own community.

Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel

In 2017, Israel's ultra-orthodox population reached one million people or 12% of the population in Israel. Ultra-orthodox Jews are devout, strict adherents to Jewish religious law. Religious precepts regulate all aspects of their daily life. They reject the modern secular lifestyle and set themselves apart by adopting distinctive clothing (Bilu & Witztum, 1993). Though many tend to view the ultra-orthodox population as homogeneous, it is in fact composed of several different communities belonging to different factions that diverge in custom, lifestyle, religious leadership, as well as in their economic and political institutions. According to Gal (2015), all ultra-orthodox people do share several characteristics, including: the Torah study as a supreme value, a conservative world view, extreme adherence to Jewish religious law, insular communal life, and extensive social control of members' behavior.

The ultra-orthodox population is growing at about 4% annually, which is one of the fastest growth rates in the Western world. The ultra-orthodox fertility rate stands at more than seven children per woman, a figure that has been on a moderate downward trend since the 1990s (Cahaner, Malach & Choshen, 2017). The fact that ultra-orthodox families tend to be quite large, combined with the expectation that ultra-orthodox men study at a yeshiva (a religious seminary), often leaves it to women to provide for the family as the lone breadwinners with help from child subsidies and the yeshiva subsidies that yeshiva students receive. Furthermore, the salaries of ultra-orthodox workers are usually low. This means that many families live under conditions of economic scarcity and poverty. According to a 2016 report, 59% of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel live in poverty and 78% identify as living in a state of continuous intergenerational poverty (Moshe, 2016).

In the last few years, however, ultra-orthodox society in Israel has been going through various changes that are bringing it closer to majority trends. The number of ultra-orthodox students enrolled in higher education institutions is rising. This phenomenon is related to the growing number of ultra-orthodox people who are joining the workforce and enlisting in the army (in specialized tracks). Despite these trends, how-

ever, and despite the fact that certain ultra-orthodox factions are gradually becoming less insular, Israeli public discourse tends to see all ultra-orthodox people as part of the same closed community that imposes its lifestyle on the rest of society (e.g. by opposing public transportation on the Sabbath), and that comprises an economic burden on society rather than contributing to it.

In conclusion, ultra-orthodox society is a minority society that is itself composed of different groups, a society that is undergoing a wide variety of changes. Ultra-orthodox students who participated in this study were experiencing these changes first-hand given that they chose to pursue academic degrees in an Israeli academic institution, rather than study at a yeshiva.

Ultra-Orthodox Students in Israeli Higher Education

The ultra-orthodox are a significantly underrepresented group in the Israeli higher education system. Only 3.5% of all Israeli students are ultra-orthodox, even though they comprise 13.5% of college-aged individuals (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). However, in the last two and a half decades, there has been a significant rise in the number of ultra-orthodox students: from a few dozen in the 1990s, to 625 in 2000, to 11,000 today. There has been a 16.3% annual rate of increase in the number of ultra-orthodox students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Klein, Carol & Ophir, 2015; Malach, 2014). The 2016–2017 academic year was the first year where there was a decrease in the number of ultra-orthodox B.A. students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Women comprise 68% of all ultra-orthodox students and men comprise 32%. About 53% of all ultra-orthodox students are married. The average age of male ultra-orthodox students is higher than that of female ultra-orthodox students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In 2016–2017, 9232 ultra-orthodox students were enrolled in B.A. degree tracks, comprising 3.9% of all Israeli B.A. students. Of these students, 70% were enrolled in one of 19 ultra-orthodox programs offered in Israeli higher education institutions. Ultra-orthodox students are even more

underrepresented in M.A. (2.5%) and Ph.D. (0.6%) programs. More than half of the ultra-orthodox students study education, teaching, social science, and law (ibid).

The academic drop-out rate among ultra-orthodox students is almost three times higher than among Jewish non-ultra-orthodox students, standing at 23.9% as opposed to 8.2%, respectively (Shukrum, Krentzler, Naftalovich & Dadash, 2017). It therefore seems that more ultra-orthodox students are enrolling in higher education programs each year, but many of them encounter difficulties and challenges that force them to drop out before finishing their bachelor's degree.

The academization of ultra-orthodox society is highly controversial in this society. There are several reasons for ultra-orthodox society's ideological and moral opposition to ultra-orthodox students enrolling in academic study (Malchi, Cohen & Kaufman, 2008). First, some aspects of the academic courses' content contradict the ultra-orthodox worldview, and ultra-orthodox people are therefore forbidden from being exposed to them. Second, ultra-orthodox society celebrates the *talmid chacham*—the "wise student" who dedicates every minute of his time to studying sacred texts in a yeshiva. Ultra-orthodox leaders fear that brilliant ultra-orthodox academics and students would undermine the *talmid chacham*'s social position, thereby leading to the abandonment of the yeshivas in favor of the universities. Finally, there is concern regarding situations that involve gender immodesty: inappropriate attire, unacceptable contact between men and women, and exposure to immodest content in academic courses (see Baum, Yedidya, Schwartz & Aran, 2014; Moskovich & Liberman, 2018; Novis Deutsch & Rubin, 2018).

Secular academic leaders have also opposed the proposed systemic changes aimed at allowing ultra-orthodox students to integrate, particularly those pertaining to gender separation, which may undermine the openness and liberalism of Israeli academic institutions and the status of women. For instance, Tirosh (2016), an expert in anti-discrimination law and feminist jurisprudence and one of the most prominent opponents of gender segregation in Israeli academic institutions, wrote the following in response to Israeli universities' adoption of a series of changes recommended by the Israeli Council for Higher Education:

> The Council for Higher Education asked universities to make three cultural-religious adaptations to ultra-orthodox students: teach classes far from the main university campus; teach in separate classrooms for men and women; and prohibit female lecturers to teach male classrooms. […] Is an academic degree deserving of the title "academic" if it does not include subjects that are hard for the students to digest? […] A learning environment in which the lecturer's sex determines whether she is allowed to enter the classroom is not an academic learning environment.

These words reflect the anxiety and discomfort that many secular faculty and students feel as a result of the direction to which the Israeli academy is heading. The academization of ultra-orthodox society in Israel is one of the main processes that shape the experience of the participants in this study.

Ultra-Orthodox People with Disabilities: The Social Need

In Jerusalem there are between 27,000 and 50,000 ultra-orthodox people with disabilities, including physical, mental, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. Given that they belong to a minority group, ultra-orthodox people with disabilities are doubly discriminated against in Israeli society. For example, ultra-orthodox people with disabilities have higher unemployment rates and greater economic difficulties, both in comparison to the ultra-orthodox who do not have disabilities as well as in comparison to secular people with disabilities (Alfassi-Henley, 2014). In addition, most of them experience a serious lack of information regarding the rights and the services they are eligible for, which is partly due to poor access to information on the Internet and other media. Similarly to people with disabilities from other sectors, ultra-orthodox individuals with disabilities often experience stigma, shame, and concealment. There is an interesting tension within ultra-orthodox society regarding people with disabilities. On the one hand, ultra-orthodox society excels in mutual assistance and social solidarity. There is also a growing awareness in the

ultra-orthodox society of the needs of people with disabilities, reflected, for example, in the existence of integrative educational frameworks at every age level. On the other hand, however, concern for people with disabilities is mostly in the spirit of the "medical model of disability," an approach that focuses on "helping them" that preserves the status quo rather than empowering them.

Promoting the human rights of individuals with disabilities in ultra-orthodox communities entails several challenges stemming from certain characteristics of ultra-orthodox society (Caplan, 2007; Caplan & Stadler, 2012; Gal, 2015) that impact the implementation of international human rights norms in this society. Firstly, many ultra-orthodox people have complex, suspicious, and sometimes even negative and hostile attitudes toward the state and state institutions. According to transnational human rights discourse, however, the state is responsible for protecting and promoting its citizens' human rights. This might create a dissonance that should be meticulously addressed. Secondly, the prevailing ultra-orthodox discourse emphasizes charitable and benevolent endeavors and "acts of loving kindness" that might be at odds with conceptions of human rights. Thirdly, Jewish tradition tends to emphasize duties and obligations rather than rights, although there are echoes of human rights ideas in Jewish religious law (Cohn, 1984; Cover, 1987; Dagan, Lifshitz & Stern, 2014). And finally, ultra-orthodox culture largely praises social continuity and conservatism rather than change, whereas the transnational human rights discourse aspires to promote positive change worldwide. Key human rights issues, such as equal rights to women and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning), contradict ultra-orthodox social norms.

The Program

The Jerusalem College of Technology—Lev Academic Center (JCT), established in 1969, is a Jewish religious academic institution offering undergraduate and graduate programs. They provide courses on different

campuses for men and women in order to address the needs of orthodox Jewish students. Almost all the 4500 students are observant orthodox, of which around 2000 (44%) are ultra-orthodox. In line with national trends, two-thirds of the ultra-orthodox students are women. The proportion of *JCT* students who are ultra-orthodox has rapidly increased in the past decade.

In early 2015, *JCT* founded *Lev in the Community*,[1] the college's flagship civic engagement program focusing on the promotion of human rights of people with disabilities in areas such as housing rights, education, employment, accessibility, due process, and equality. Specifically, the students and staff assist and empower people with disabilities in the ultra-orthodox communities in Jerusalem, addressing their problems and needs. This project was established in the spirit of "the social model of disability" that views people with disabilities as having a unique contribution to society, and that everything possible must be done to enable them to realize this contribution, both for their benefit, and, no less importantly, for the benefit of society (Oliver, 1990). A central goal of the *Lev in the Community* project is to create a stable, well-established, professional, and effective framework for long-term student engagement that is recognized and appreciated by the ultra-orthodox community and supported by all partners in the process.

Participants' Characteristics

Of the *Lev in the Community* students in the 2015–2016 school year, two-thirds (61.2%) were men and a third (38.8%) were women. The volunteers' average age was 28.4 (the age range was quite wide—between 20 and 52 years). Over half the students were married and had children (53.2%), whereas small percentages were married but had no children (10.6%). Another third were single (34%). There were an average number of two children per volunteer (of the students who said that they had children).

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[1] See http://www.jct.ac.il/en/community.

Methodology

This study is part of a broader study that holistically examines all factors involved in the process of ultra-orthodox students' volunteering in the community, including the staff members of the organizations that they volunteer at, the people that the students work with, and their families. The study involved gathering quantitative and qualitative data using questionnaires, in-depth interviews and participant observations. Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical tools, whereas qualitative data underwent content analysis.

The questionnaire was distributed twice: before the volunteer period began and after the volunteer period ended, with minor phrasing changes to match the timing. The questionnaires were based on several validated questionnaires that gage civic engagement, including a validated questionnaire authored by Goldner and Golan (2017, 2018). The statements and questions in the questionnaire were formulated based on interviews conducted with people belonging to different religious groups, to culturally adapt them to Jewish orthodox and ultra-orthodox society. The questionnaire was composed primarily of different types of closed-ended questions, but it concluded with several open-ended questions. It was sent to the students via email, all answers were anonymous. The questionnaire has been distributed to the program participants at the beginning and ending of each year since the project began or for the last three years. In this chapter, we will focus on the findings from the first year's questionnaire. In that year, 49 students answered the first questionnaire and 47 students answered the second questionnaire. In addition, we will present qualitative research findings based on data from the last three years.

Socioeconomic Status and Its Impact on Students' Volunteer Experience

As stated above, most of the ultra-orthodox population in Israel live in poverty and rely quite heavily on intra-communal economic assistance systems and on government subsidies. Given this, we aimed to describe

the economic status of the student volunteers of the *Lev in the Community* project by comparing it to the median income in Israel, as well as to the economic class that they were born into. Most students (83.6%) said that their current economic condition relative to the median income in Israel was on par or lower than that income level. Of these students, half (44.9%) said that their economic status was lower than the median income (6578 ILS per month). Only 4.1% of all students said that their economic status was higher than the median income. However, we were not only interested in the students' present economic status but also in the economic background of their families, as it is well known that family wealth or its absence has a decisive role in determining an individual's economic status. We asked them whether their economic condition became worse, improved, or stayed the same as they grew older relative to their parents' when the students were children (n = 49). Two-thirds (63.3%) of the respondents said that their economic situation is the same or worse as compared to that of their parents when they were children. By cross-checking the data regarding their present-day economic situation and their evaluation of their economic situation relative to that of their parents during their childhood years, we concluded that many of the students likely come from families of low economic status and that their situation has either stayed the same or deteriorated. Nevertheless, all students who participated in the project are pursuing an academic profession that will significantly increase their chances for social mobility and improve their socioeconomic status. This is perhaps in contrast with their peers who are enrolled in yeshivas. It can be assumed that their pursuit of higher education will allow them to compete for relatively high-paying jobs in the labor market, which will have significant consequences for their economic future and that of their children.

Goldner and Golan's (2017, 2018) comprehensive study of student volunteers in Israel analyzed the impact of the students' socioeconomic backgrounds on their volunteer experience. They found that most students felt that they belonged to a higher socioeconomic status than the people that they volunteered with. Consequently, the class gap and sense of being privileged that students felt relative to the people that they volunteered with was one of the most significant prisms through which students experienced their volunteering, and this was an experience that

continued to have an impact on them for years afterwards. In contrast, we found no evidence of the socioeconomic gaps and privileges that students in that study often ascribed to themselves, whether at the group level or at the individual level. Students did describe the unequal power relations between a person without disabilities and a person with disabilities, but these were not seen as linked with privilege or differences in socioeconomic background. Rather, they were seen as a result of the disability itself. Unlike most Israeli students, many of the *Lev in the Community* project participants and of the *JCT* student body, in general, come from a lower socioeconomic background that is not much different than the people that they volunteer with. This fact made it easier for the students and community members to form the kinds of equal, mutual, and symmetrical relationships that are perceived as a necessary condition for successful academy-community partnerships and whose absence is a key factor that causes the failure of civic engagement programs (Golan, Rosenfeld & Orr, 2017; Miller & Hafner, 2008; Strier, 2011; White, 2010). This fact encourages identification and a sense of intimacy and solidarity between the students and community members that they volunteer with. It helps prevent a sense of alienation, estrangement, and Othering on both sides.

The minor class differences made it easier for students to work with members of the ultra-orthodox communities in Jerusalem. However, this was not the only aspect that distinguished the student group in this study, compared with students who took part in previous studies. It seems that *Lev in the Community* participants benefited from their supportive immediate social environment and from their life experience. Both aspects contributed greatly to the success of the social activity in which they were involved, as will be elaborated below.

Extensive Volunteer Experience and a Supportive Social Environment

In order to characterize the students' life experience in the context of volunteering, we examined whether and to what extent the students volunteered in the past. We found that the vast majority (81.6%) of the

students volunteered or did charity work before participating in the *Lev in the Community* project. Of those who had previous volunteer or charity experience, the vast majority (77.5%) did that work under the auspices of an organization. Eighty percent of them had volunteered on a consistent basis, meaning that most of the students had had an institutionalized, consistent volunteer experience through a civil society organization over an extended period of time. The distribution of the students' volunteer experience shows that the key areas in which they volunteered were education, visiting the sick, medical assistance and care, and the police forces.

The high rate of volunteerism among the student participants might be linked to their social environment, which they described as encouraging them to help their fellow man without expecting compensation. The students were asked questions about their social environment both in the questionnaire that they filled out before the volunteer period, as well as after the volunteer period concluded. Eleven statements were formulated in order to measure the extent to which the students see their environment as encouraging and supporting volunteerism. We found that the volunteers saw their environment as encouraging volunteerism, helping their fellow community members and practicing *gmilut chasadim*,[2] rather than seeing such work as a waste of time. This approach remained stable and unchanged at the conclusion of the volunteer period. The students reported that they know many people that volunteer and contribute their time and money to help their fellow community members.

For example, here is what one of the students, who was married and had children, had to say:

> My wife started volunteering at *Magen David Adom* (MDA),[3] so […] I felt that she was the only one volunteering and I was always just at home with the kids, so I said that I'll volunteer too and then she'll be home with the kids.

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[2] In the Jewish tradition, *gmilut chasadim* is a principle that translates roughly into "acts of loving kindness" and that refers to all manner of charitable works.

[3] Israel's medical emergency service.

This remark expresses the fact that the students' immediate social environment focuses on volunteering and this impacts the students' choice to volunteer. This remark also shows that the student's family and social environment can even challenge and change the student's decision *not* to volunteer and encourage their community engagement. In this case, the impact of the social environment is related to the gender division of labor. Another student talked about the role of volunteering in his life: "I naturally volunteer. I am a gabbai[4] at the synagogue. I do a lot of things in the community. […] I am also in the Civil Guard.[5] Wherever I can help I help."

As reflected in their words, the students did not see themselves as in any way exceptional for being volunteers. It can therefore be concluded that the volunteers live in an environment that appreciates community service and that engages in many different kinds of community assistance activities. Furthermore, it is possible that the fact that communal life is organized around a synagogue and a religious lifestyle focused on mutual aid and doing good also serves to create a social climate that encourages volunteering. One of the students talked about the relationship between his being a religious person and his willingness to volunteer:

It's clear that religious people are supposedly raised in communities, and you have a synagogue, you feel that […] this whole idea of giving is much less strange to you. So yes, I think that there might be some connection to the fact that religious people volunteer more. It can be that the religion is always on about give, give, give. It can be that this is related, but I don't know.

The willingness to volunteer that stems from a religious lifestyle is only one of a complex array of different motivating factors, as we will see below.

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[4] A beadle of a synagogue.

[5] A volunteer organization that helps with police activities.

A Complex Set of Motivations for Volunteering

In an effort to reach an in-depth understanding of the students' motivations for volunteering in the project, we asked them about their primary motivations for participating in the *Lev in the Community* project (the question was open and students could therefore list more than one motivation). The content analysis of their responses reveals three main reasons for volunteering: the first was a desire to contribute to the community: "out of a sense of mission to engage in acts of kindness and give of myself to others" and in other words: "because I am interested in contributing to the community." The second reason for their participation in the project was their desire for personal development, to acquire skills and to feel satisfied because they are using the full range of their abilities: "To contribute to society, to realize my abilities, and to learn!," and "I will have an opportunity to help people with disabilities while acquiring tools that will help me help more people in the future." The third reason was their need for the scholarship offered to participants to pay for tuition.

As described above, the economic status of ultra-orthodox people in Israel is exceptionally low; hence, paying for an academic degree is a significant economic challenge. This fact has many consequences for the students' lives. Many of the student volunteers worked at least one job during their studies, and many were already married and parents to young children, which added significantly to their workload. Some of them even received scholarships to fund their studies, and participation in the *Lev in the Community* comprised yet another way for them to pay tuition. However, it is important to emphasize that the yearly scholarship amount that they received was minor, equal to about half their annual tuition. One of the students described the factors that led her to volunteer: "Why did I choose to volunteer? Because of the scholarship too, I'm not going to lie. But also, to do something aside from studying all day and to fund my studies."

Another student discussed a wide range of considerations:

> You can say that there are at least three reasons. One, first of all, is that I had always wanted to volunteer for things, but I usually didn't have a

chance to. […] The place I volunteered at is actually an idea that I had had before. And it saved me a course in the fourth year and they told me they'd give me a scholarship.

It is interesting to note that while some respondents referred to the first or second reasons as their sole reason for volunteering, none of the respondents described the scholarship in such terms. There may be distortion here as a result of the respondents' social desirability bias. However, this can also be seen as a reflection of the complex circumstances these ultra-orthodox students must navigate, given that they become parents at a relatively young age, are bereft of economic support, and must juggle familial commitments, academic studies, and the need to provide for themselves.

Identifying with and Getting to Know the "Other"

Since the *Lev in the Community* project focuses on promoting the rights of people with disabilities, we were interested in the volunteers' degree of familiarity with people with disabilities before they started volunteering in the project. After a year of volunteering at *Lev in the Community*, questionnaire respondents were asked to rank their degree of familiarity with people with disabilities at two points in time: before they started volunteering in the project and afterwards. A third (30%) of all students reported that they have a person that is close to them who lives with a disability. The interviews likewise reflected that students have people in their lives that live with disabilities. One of the students talked about his son's disability, which was one of his motivations for participating in the project:

One of my children has a certain syndrome, and it can be that that influenced my decision [to volunteer] because I know that a lot of people helped him and are helping, not necessarily from volunteer organizations but from more official governmental organizations, so I said maybe this is a good opportunity to give back to some organization, to contribute from my experience or just by helping your fellow man.

Another large group (43%) reported that they had worked or volunteered with people with disabilities, whereas another quarter said that they had met someone with a disability. Two percent of respondents said that they have had no familiarity with people with disabilities before the project began. Given the students' rich volunteering background and their pre-existing familiarity with people with disabilities, one might have expected that the students would not feel that the volunteering was a fresh new experience that exposed them to an entirely new world. For example, a student whose two sisters have Down syndrome said the following:

> Question: Do you think that the project taught you something about people with disabilities that you didn't know about?
> Answer: In my case no, because I grew up with it. I think that I taught other people. […] I lived with people like that and grew up with people like this.

However, some of the students reported being exposed to a reality that they were previously unaware of and subsequently developing a new awareness of people with disabilities as a category that includes a broad range of disabilities—physical, sensory, intellectual-developmental, mental, and psychological that manifest themselves in a multitude of daily challenges.

 One of the students talked about their first exposure to the world of people living with psychological disabilities, even after many years of volunteering at MDA and growing up with family members with sensory and physical disabilities:

> I volunteered at MDA in the more physical field, in the emergency field, first aid. […] In this project, the field that I chose to take on is psychological disability because I really haven't been exposed to it. […] And it was a challenge for me, really challenging. Something that is totally different than what I'm used to. My father in law is blind and my mother in law is disabled as a result of a car accident so I am exposed to the physical aspect as well, but the psychological aspect was a totally different area, you can't touch the disability. It's a disability that you need to try to work with him by forming a relationship and not by helping the disabled person physically. […] My mother in law, I took her to dialysis. I was interested in

helping someone that. […] I mean I don't have training as a psychologist or something, to see how I can help such a person. And it was really successful, it was very nice.

A student who volunteered with a blind person shared the experience of discovering and being exposed to the 'Other':

Volunteering gave me a lot because I learned to get to know the other side of the population. People that have a hard time, people that we don't see on the day-to-day and are not around us. I learned to get to know this part, that there are people in need and that we need to think about them.

The experience of encountering and being exposed to the world of the 'Other', of getting acquainted with the daily reality, challenges, and coping strategies of people with disabilities, was meaningful for many students. The question, however, is whether and to what degree this experience translates into conceptual change, and in other words whether these meaningful experiences impact the students' positions regarding people with disabilities.

Positions on People with Disabilities

One section of the questionnaire was dedicated to the students' positions regarding people with disabilities before and after their volunteering. The study found that the actual degree of change in the student volunteers' positions on people with disabilities before and after the volunteer period differed significantly from the degree of change that the students themselves reported regarding their positions over the course of the year. Though a paired analysis of the students' positions vis-à-vis people with disabilities shows that the students' positions remained stable over the course of the year, the students themselves reported that their opinions have changed significantly.

Forty-two students fully completed the questionnaire before and after the volunteer period. To examine the changes in the students' attitudes

toward people with disabilities, we conducted a paired analysis of the way that the students ranked 18 statements. We found that the respondents were quite stable in their opinions and that there were no significant changes in the way they scored the statements before and after the volunteer period. However, we did not rely solely on scoring statements to learn about the students' positions; we also asked them to report on how the encounter with people with disabilities in the project impacted their positions and opinions toward them. The scale ranged from 1- the encounter did not have an impact on my positions and opinions, and 7- the encounter significantly impacted my positions and opinions. For the 47 respondents, the average was 5.02, meaning that the encounter impacted their positions and opinions significantly, with a standard deviation of 1.8.

Later, we asked the respondents to describe how the encounter impacted their positions. Some of them described the experience as their first time being exposed to the daily reality of living with a disability. For example, "I understood how unaware I was of what they had to contend with in society, how much help they need," and in another case: "Before my volunteering, I was not aware of what difficulties people with disabilities face every day. I had an opportunity to get to know a few people with disabilities and their families." Another student wrote: "Now, after volunteering in the *Bizchut* organization, I came to acknowledge the ability and need of people with disabilities to be independent, to be recognized in society, according to their will, and I became aware of the injustice that exists." Others described feeling a kind of empathy grounded in a deep, unmediated, and day-to-day familiarity with the challenges and hardships faced by people with disabilities:

> I think that the minute that a person that has no disabilities enters the lives of people with disabilities, to see a bit of what they experience, then he understands how difficult it really is to be a person with disabilities, and how important the environment is for helping these people as much as possible, because the environment has lots of power on this matter—like the issue of promoting the rights of people with disabilities.

Another way that the experience impacted them is that it shattered their stereotypes:

> When you hear about the experience that people with disabilities go
> through […] the positions and opinions toward people with disabilities
> completely change. It's true that I and people like me had a view of people
> with disabilities that saw them as if they were needy and sad people who
> need to be pitied.

Another student said: "Today I see disability as part of society. […]
Beforehand I felt that they are a completely separate part of the popula-
tion," and: "[The project] helped me treat them as human beings that
have rights, not as people that are stigmatized for being disabled," and "In
the past, I would shy away from the blind and the disabled, I was really
repelled, today [when] I see a blind or disabled person I speak to them."

We can also shed light on these findings by referring to the qualitative
data that we collected using the questionnaire's open questions. First, as
we mentioned above, a quarter of all students reported that someone
close to them is living with a disability (either a family member or roman-
tic partner). Another large group reported that they worked, volunteered,
or had previously met a person living with a disability. Thus, it is reason-
able to assume that the students formed opinions regarding people with
disabilities before the volunteer period. Furthermore, many of them had
volunteered with people with disabilities in the past, as one student, who
ranked the degree of change in her positions as 2 on a 1–7 scale, wrote:

> I have always known people with disabilities from up close, my brother is
> disabled, and I also volunteered with children with disabilities a lot, there-
> fore my familiarity with D., a blind woman, has not changed my positions
> toward people with disabilities, which were always positive and accepting.
> But over the years I have had very little contact, and certainly not close
> contact, with blind people, and now I saw up close what they face and their
> integration into society and it changed my positions toward them a bit.
> But not a lot. But it made me admire them more for how uncompromis-
> ingly they face challenges in life.

In conclusion, the gap between positions measured by a series of state-
ments, as opposed to the self-reported shift in positions, might reflect the
depth and complexity of the opinion change process and raises a meth-
odological question as to the trustworthiness of comparing scores given

to statements at two points in time as an accurate measure of position change. While it is possible that a student *believed* that not enough buildings are made accessible to wheelchairs both before and after the volunteer period, or that the student knew that people with disabilities have a hard time finding a romantic partner both before and after the volunteer period—this should not be interpreted to mean that ones' opinions regarding people with disabilities remained unchanged. From a methodological point of view, those somewhat contradicting results demonstrate the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative data that can represent a more complex reality and better describe the in-depth processes that the student volunteers experienced.

Tension Between Conservatism and Social Change

The *Lev in the Community* volunteer program includes lectures, tours, and group discussions regarding the rights of people with disabilities and the social change necessary to achieve equal rights. The lectures were given by professionals from different organizations (*Ezer Mizion*, *Kesher*, *Bizchut*, the *Health Ministry*, etc.) working to promote policies that view people with disabilities as deserving of equal right and the freedom to choose and make decisions about their lives. The content of these lectures challenged conservative approaches that emphasize continuity and maintenance of the status quo and presented perspectives regarding the rights and independence of people with disabilities to shape their lives as they see fit, which were relatively new to the students. They sparked spirited discussions in class, where some of the students argued that these ideas cannot be implemented in daily life and that there is a reason that people with disabilities usually live apart from the community, with professionals and guardians making decisions for them. One of the students referred to a lecture from *Bizchut*,[6] who talked about the need to allow people

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[6] *Bizchut—The Israeli Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities* is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1992 and is dedicated to promoting people with disabilities' right to participate as fully and independently as possible in the life of the mainstream community. http://bizchut. org.il/en/.

with disabilities to lead independent lives in the community and who opposed sending people with disabilities to special institutions. The student, a long-time volunteer in *MDA* and *Yad Sarah*,[7] related his impressions of the lecture:

> I didn't agree with a word she said. I think that she's way too extremist, but it was very fascinating and interesting. […] She says that every person must live in the community, even though they're disabled, which is right. I'm not saying that it's not right. But by the same token I think that every person that is in a place where they're comfortable and where they feel well and they have everything they need and they are respectable and good—that's enough. For her, it's not enough. […] Doron Almog is a major-general in the army and he had an autistic son, and he established a kind of resort village. They call it *Aleh Negev*. It's a place filled with disabled, autistic kids, it's a really amazing village, green, swimming pools, something that's out of control. But for her that's not good because they need to live with other people. That's fine. She's very extreme. But it was very interesting.

On the other hand, there were people who connected to the rights discourse and found it useful and relevant. One of the students described how that lecture changed his approach to people with disabilities:

> There was a lecturer […] who talked about this thing where even a person with cerebral palsy who is barely functioning, they deserve to decide for themselves who takes care of them, who washes them, where they live. Why does a person with cerebral palsy need to have everything decided for them? That was very meaningful. […] On the other hand, I was filled with sorrow at the fact that many people really don't make decisions about their lives. […] And on the other hand, it made me want to make an impact on this somehow. […] It's true that I'm not doing anything about this now but at least I have an opinion on the matter and that's important too sometimes. And at least when I come to a situation where I need to choose to change something, I will have an option to change the policy somewhere in one of my workplaces, with God's help, so I have the knowledge and awareness of these things, and that is very important.

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[7] A large Israeli volunteer organization best known for loaning medical equipment.

The academic approaches that were taught in the courses, tours, and lectures challenged more conservative worldviews. An example of a worldview that does not necessarily align with the idea of social change is the notion that disabilities have reasons, importance, and meaning behind them. This worldview is opposed to the idea that disabilities are the result of a physical-biological coincidence. One of the students, who volunteered with a blind woman who lives with a severe intellectual-developmental disability, believes that God gave this woman a special mission in the world:

> I had a question that is a little deep. Let's say that a person, from age zero, does not move, does not think, does not talk, and does not see. Like, what is that, that's […] not really a human being. And then you understand that actually the Master of the Universe also gave jobs to all kinds of things in the world. And everyone has their job. Meaning it seems that she has a different job, given her duties in the world. […] I guess that this soul has got a different job.

It is a challenge to combine the rights discourse with the idea that there is a reason for why this woman was born with such a complex set of disabilities. It requires openness and an ability to consider ideas that even if they are not entirely contradictory, are far from perfectly compatible. The process of engaging new ideas embedded in unfamiliar discourses was not only challenging to the students but to the academic staff as well. One of the most meaningful illustrations of this fact is the tension between providing daily assistance and addressing the needs of people with disabilities, which the students saw as "acts of loving kindness," and work related to promoting policy change, raising awareness, and challenging public discourse. Academic settings traditionally focus on social change based on critical thinking while keeping away from daily assistance activities that are seen as peripheral, as unskilled "grunt work" that does not require adopting academic values such as critical thinking, polemics, and the ability to promote change. However, *Lev in the Community* participants were quite committed to "acts of loving kindness," to the daily assistance activities needed to address people's most basic needs—food distribution, assistance with housework, transportation to treatment appointments, and so on.

A student whose volunteering involved driving disabled patients to medical appointments talked about why he chose this kind of volunteering:

> I'm used to it, I've worked at this in the past. I love the road, I think I'm good at it, meaning at taking the person to the car, making sure everything is alright, tying them in the right way, giving them the confidence that I won't accidentally drop them, throwing in a good word here and there, talking to them. That's what I'm familiar with, that's what I know, and that's what I wanted to do.

Another student talked about volunteering with a person who was living with vision impairment:

> I come in the morning, no one is home, so he sits around bored, so we just try to pass the time and have fun. I read him a book, I read him emails. He needs to shop for each week, so I go to the market and do all the shopping that he wants. He tells me about himself, tells me about the family, we have experiences together that way. And that's it. Fun.

The students' reflections raise the importance of daily life. The first student stressed the importance of driving patients to undergo medical exams in such a way that they will feel safe. The second student described how he works hard to cheer up the person that he is volunteering with, such that the experience of boredom is replaced with an experience of connection, conversation, and helping with housework.

The students' approach challenged the academic staff, which was initially hesitant at the idea of allocating the students' volunteer hours toward activities that have nothing to do with social change and that focus on the individual person and their immediate needs. However, as the staff's perspective changed, the types of volunteer work that they had previously seen as more marginal started to become more meaningful. The academic staff's change of perspective was reflected in what they wrote about Haim Yehuda Kaplan, an ultra-orthodox student who received an excellence prize from the Council for Higher Education for his participation in the *Lev in the Community* project. The staff chose to

recommend him for the prize because the student's volunteer activities exemplified the integration of day-to-day assistance aimed at addressing immediate needs with work to advance for social change. This was reflected in the recommendation that the staff wrote to the prize committee:

> Haim Yehuda Kaplan volunteered in the *Seeach Sod* organization and worked with the residents who had the most severe disabilities and needed the most care. He fed the residents, caring for them with unending compassion and dedication. He realized the virtue of loving kindness in its purest and highest form. In addition, Haim was one of a group of students that founded a rights center for people with disabilities in the ultra-orthodox community. There he addressed some of the most complicated cases, in which the authorities violated the rights of the applicants. For example, he accompanied a case where the applicant's son, a teenager with Down syndrome, waited for five years while the authorities failed to find a suitable ultra-orthodox educational framework for him. After working with the child's mother, the Health Ministry and the Health Minister, the child was finally entered into an educational framework that fit his needs. Haim combined the provision of daily assistance to address the most basic needs, such as eating, cleaning, and social interaction. In parallel, he worked for social change, realization of rights and raising awareness of the systemic shortcomings regarding people with disabilities.

The Liminality of Lev in the Community

As part of the *Lev in the Community* project, a rights center for ultra-orthodox people with disabilities was established through a close and productive partnership with *Ezer Mizion*, an ultra-orthodox organization. The center's establishment highlighted the liminal position of the *Lev in the Community* project on the border between the academy and the ultra-orthodox community, and the need to bridge the differences in values and sociocultural conceptions associated with the two worlds. One example is the dual role occupied by *Ezer Mizion*, which on the one hand was and continues to be dedicated and committed to the rights center, its values, and its activities, but on the other hand, as an ultra-orthodox

organization, is concerned about publicizing its cooperation with ultra-orthodox students and "taking a side" in the charged debate over academization in the ultra-orthodox community. The students who volunteer in the center are mired in these conflicts and dilemmas and must behave in a way that matches the expectations of both their own community as well as the academic institutions that they are enrolled in. An example of this is the rights center's flyer, which was prepared to attract potential ultra-orthodox applicants. The students who were responsible for writing and designing the flyer proposed to the *Ezer Mizion* organization that both *JCT* and *Ezer Mizion* appear in the text and that the logos of both organizations appear at the top of the flyer. After much deliberation, *Ezer Mizion* agreed that its name appear in the text but refused to have its logo appear alongside the *JCT* logo on the flyer. The first version of the flyer contained the *JCT* logo by itself, but over time the students thought it better to remove the *JCT* logo so as not to put off potential ultra-orthodox applicants who may belong to groups that oppose the academization of young ultra-orthodox people. The current version does not contain any organization's logo. In a recent team meeting, it was proposed that the *JCT*'s name would be removed from the flyer's text as well. That flyer has garnered mixed responses from members of the ultra-orthodox community. On the one hand, many people with disabilities who see the flyer contact the rights center and tell the student volunteers that until they saw the flyer, they had no place to go to solve their problem. On the other hand, the flyer was often angrily torn down shortly after being put up. One of the founders and dedicated volunteers of the rights center is an ultra-orthodox man with a psychological disability who is also an MA student at another university. He told us how when he would hang flyers in ultra-orthodox synagogues and institutions, they would usually be torn down shortly after he put them up, and he had to put them up over and over again. He thought that there were at least a few reasons for this: the fact that an academic institution was behind the initiative, the stigma toward people with disabilities, and the fact that the language of rights is still not completely accepted in ultra-orthodox society. But he also believed that the flyers were being torn down because of the identity of the person putting them up, a known "mental patient". It was only on the day that he was putting up the rights center flyers and invitations to

his son's bar mitzvah[8] at the same time that he understood that the ripping down of the flyers had nothing to do with him personally: a few days later, all the bar mitzvah invitations remained posted, whereas most of the flyers were gone. This case illustrates the difficulties that ultraorthodox students face as representatives of the academy in their communities, which they volunteer at as part of an academic program.

The relationship between the academy and ultra-orthodox society is already complex on campus, but it becomes even more complex when leaving the campus and choosing to work in the ultra-orthodox community itself. Ethical codes that are taken for granted on campus must be frequently reassessed. For example, female lecturers at the *JCT*'s Tal Campus are allowed to wear pants while teaching, married lecturers are not required to cover their hair, and male lecturers are not required to wear yarmulkes (skullcaps) or hats. However, when we conducted the rights center training in the offices of *Ezer Mizion*, located near the campus, we realized that the dress code there is different. The *Ezer Mizion* organization asked that female guest lecturers, staff members at major social organizations that we invited to lecture at the training, come "dressed modestly," long skirts included. Their demand presented the project staff and the secular lecturers we invited with a complicated dilemma.

Discussion

A growing number of ultra-orthodox men and women are taking part in academic study, both for economic and personal reasons, as well as due to the government's efforts to promote university attendance and workforce participation among the ultra-orthodox to combat growing poverty in this sector. Academization processes in the ultra-orthodox community are challenging both the ultra-orthodox students and secular academics. An especially complex challenge arises when academic studies also include an element of social activism within ultra-orthodox communities. Civic engagement is meaningful for students of all backgrounds, but it is espe-

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[8] A Jewish rite of passage for boys who turn 13 years old.

cially meaningful for minority students that report a disconnect between the academic world and the sociocultural world that they come from. This sense of disconnection may be particularly strong for ultra-orthodox students because unlike other minority groups that value and strive to pursue higher education, the issue is controversial and sparks resistance in ultra-orthodox society. Many brilliant and talented ultra-orthodox students who took part in the *Lev in the Community* program and their families paid a heavy personal price for their choice to enroll in *JCT*. Their younger siblings must often enroll in less prestigious yeshivas or religious seminaries as a result of their older sibling's choice to pursue academic studies. In this context, these students' choice to return to the community as representatives of an academic institution is far from obvious, and it involves social and ethical conflicts and dilemmas. The students must constantly cross and re-cross symbolic boundaries in both directions, thus finding themselves in a liminal position as people who belong both to the ultra-orthodox community as well as to the academy. It is on this thematic axis, the higher education axis, that unique tensions arise that must be considered when developing civic engagement programs for ultra-orthodox students and students belonging to other minority groups.

Another axis that poses greater challenges to minority students than to students from the majority group is the civic engagement axis. On this axis, tensions frequently arise between values such as conservatism, continuity, and the preservation of tradition, values that are central to ultra-orthodox and religious society, and values such as social change and human rights, which the academy seeks to advance through its social activism programs. The project staff had to contend with the students' desire to engage in "acts of loving kindness" and with a degree of resistance to content related to social change that does not comport with conservative worldviews. However, it appears that the staff and students drew closer to each other on this axis. Whereas the students learned the language of human rights and how to use it in their volunteering, the staff learned the value and importance of loving kindness, which in this context includes the assistance students provided to people with disabilities in their daily lives, their interest in learning from them, and their ability to engage in enjoyable and enriching joint activities with them.

Unlike the higher education and civic engagement axes, the ultra-orthodox volunteers do not experience the same kinds of difficulties that students belonging to the majority experience on the class axis. Studies of socially involved students show that socioeconomic class gaps between the students and the people they volunteer with have a decisive impact on the students' experience of their initial encounter with the community. The initial encounter with marginalized groups that live in poverty is an enriching experience, though at times it is also destabilizing and threatening to the preconceptions that the students held about themselves, the 'Others', and the society in which they live (Beaumont et al., 2006; Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). Our study, in contrast, found that the class gap between *Lev in the Community* project participants and the people they volunteer with was relatively minor and that there were social, economic, and cultural common denominators between the two sides. This fact facilitated identification, closeness, and empathy among the students and the poverty-stricken people that they volunteer with.

Ultra-orthodox and religious students also have a relative advantage on the previous experience axis, both in having encountered people with disabilities in the past, as well as in having general experience with volunteering. The students knew people with disabilities and some of them even volunteered with people with disabilities in the past, just as they had volunteered in many other contexts. Given that, students were less shocked by their encounter with people with disabilities, including the more severe disabilities that would have made many others uneasy. Despite their previous experience, however, the students felt that they learned from their encounter with people with disabilities and that this encounter changed them. This is related, among other things, to the wide variety of different disability types that the students were exposed to in the course of the project.

While the project has had many successes, we can also point to some weak points, challenges, and trajectories for the coming years. The project's focus on improving people's daily lives is no doubt important and valuable, and its value is deeply ingrained in ultra-orthodox culture. However, it is incumbent upon us to more directly link this focus to macro-level policy change. One-on-one work can help drive policy change efforts and even protest-oriented activism. It is necessary, for

example, to promote community-led initiatives in partnership with the students and the rights center clients around issues that keep coming up in the rights center clients' cases. This is a key avenue that we intend to pursue in the coming year. Another challenge is to equip our students with a critical approach; some students still espouse a more conservative attitude and value social continuity far more than their peers in other higher education institutions. At the same time, however, ultra-orthodox students are often less establishment-oriented than non-ultra-orthodox students, meaning they are less likely to regard the state and its institutions as sacrosanct. This attitude should be leveraged to promote change among the students and the community, whether by affirming the link between theory and practice or by including additional critical lectures and workshops. Even if the students express opposition to the new content, the very fact of having the debate will expose them to new ideas. The best-case scenario from our point of view is that each party to this process, and particularly the project faculty and the students, will overcome their hesitation and step out of their comfort zone.

Civic engagement by minority students in their communities requires a continuous process of reciprocal learning among the program staff, students, partner organizations, and members of the partnering communities. The academic and professional faculty that accompanies the project must be open and willing to make changes, even ones that may appear "unconventional" in projects that are geared toward students from the majority society. This requires flexibility and a willingness to make adaptations "as you go", maintaining constant, sincere, and open dialogue among all partners to the process.

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