“I’m Like a Chameleon”: Coping Strategies Used by Haredi Women Doctoral Students Reconciling Their Religious and Academic Identities

Adi Binhas

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Abstract
This study examined Jewish ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) women doctoral students to analyze the shaping of their religious and academic identities, and particularly the coping strategies they use to reconcile them. It is informed by theories on the definition of social and collective identities and the way individuals assimilate upon encountering a new collective, as well as by actual processes of Haredi integration in Israeli academia over the years. The study concludes that in their academic development, these women challenge their traditional social worlds and enter the world of learning, which in their community is exclusively reserved for men.

Keywords Haredi women · Higher education · Social identity · Collective · Intersectional identity

Introduction

The king’s daughter is all glorious within (Psalms 45:13, KJV).

The motivation for this study came from my participation in Challenging Gender Inequality in Science and Research (CHANGE, n.d.)—a European Union Horizon 2020 project led in Israel by Dr. Hana Himi. My role in the project was as a researcher and change agent, studying barriers and facilitators in the integration of

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✉ Adi Binhas
adibinhas@gmail.com

1 Beit Berl College, Kfar Sabba, Israel
Jewish women doctors of Ethiopian descent in Israeli academia. As an immigration researcher, I was interested in the effects of their immigrant identity on their integration in a new sociocultural environment. After concluding this project, I sought to widen its scope and also study ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish women studying for higher education degrees. Although these women have not immigrated to Israel in the physical sense, they do experience cross-cultural migration upon their encounter with Israeli higher education. Whereas recent years have seen a growing number of Haredi higher education students, mainly in dedicated Haredi institutes of higher education, in 2021, Haredi doctoral students (both men and women) in general universities in Israel numbered less than 100 (Cahaner, 2020). Thus, while the discourse on diversity and multiculturalism in public systems, including higher education, is high on the Israeli agenda, and while the higher education system enables social mobility and integration, it remains out of reach for certain groups due to various barriers (Hendin 2011). This is perhaps more so for Haredi women owing to the intersection of their gender and religious identities.

Many studies have addressed the integration of ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim), and particularly women, in Israeli academia, but have hitherto focused mainly on BA and MA studies. In Haredi society, these studies are seen as a means of improving pay and job market prospects (Caplan 2007; Kalagy 2012; Layosh 2014; Rubin and Novis-Deutsch 2017; Tal and Yimon 1998). Doctoral studies do not necessarily serve these purposes and provide little visible gain for the community. Moreover, they involve a long-term career commitment that includes studying and teaching in non-Haredi institutes, critical thought and writing, and an encounter with a normative world completely different—if not diametrically opposed—to the core values of the Haredi community. Thus, the innovation in this study lies in addressing the population of Haredi women doctoral students and graduates, and particularly in analyzing the identity transformation they undergo as they maneuver between the two sociocultural groups to which they belong.

### Theoretical Background

#### Social, Collective, and Intersectional Identity

*Social identity* refers to an individual’s belonging to certain groups based on national, religious, gender and other categories. Cognitively, identity helps people define themselves and the boundaries separating them from other identities, and also includes psychological traits, social norms, and attitudes (Ashforth and Meal 1989; Brewer and Gardner 1996). It is also related to behavioral and emotional aspects, and characteristics shared with other group members (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Tajfel and Turner 2004). According to Weber (1988), social identity is influenced by the individual’s social, historical, and political environment, and is also related to culture conveyed by social institutions. These in turn create arrangements whereby individuals shape their identity within personal and social spaces and play roles as expected of them (Fearon and Laitin 2000).
Collective identity is derived from individuals’ relations with the collective in terms of lifestyles, norms, memories, beliefs, etc. A collective framework provides individuals with the tools to judge and evaluate their reality, and harmonize their identity (Cohen, 2006). Collective identity develops, and is characterized by, internal diversity, including contradictions with other identities adopted by the individual in some cases (Hall 1990; Sagy 2006; Shoval 2010). Studies on the identity construction of traditional groups in higher education have shown how the two worlds may be reconciled to produce a stable identity (Erikson 1968). Nevertheless, the encounter with different identities may also be conflictual (Hole 1990).

Intersectional theory views the individual as being made up of multiple characteristics and belonging to multiple groups, and examines the interrelatedness of various identity elements. According to the intersectionality approach, an individual’s belonging to a gender and an ethnic and class group, for example, represents social and institutional systems that shape these identities. Identity elements are intertwined without the ability of distinguishing clearly between them, forming the main bases for social differentiation and stratification. For example, a study on women from non-dominant ethnic groups in higher education showed that they have complex identity characteristics, and that they create a kind of multifocal lens with which to perceive the world (Andersen 2005; Andersen and Collins 2007).

In the Israeli context, studies from the intersectionality approach have addressed identity tensions and contradictions experienced by Mizrahi Jewish professors (of Asian and African origin) (Shohat 2001) and clashes between ethnic and national identity (Yonah and Shenhav 2005). Others have focused on class (Gutwein, 2001) and gender (Toran 2009). All agree, however, that there is no single identity factor that defines the individual, but that the individual is made up of a combination of identities that do not always harmonize. The present study examines the combination of two major identity elements: the collective Haredi identity, associated with a devout, conservative, and segregative society, and the collective secular, rational, and critical academic identity.

Berry’s Model of Acculturation

The literature classifies different ways in which minority groups such as migrants deal with the majority group. One of the best-known typologies divides them into several prototypical models of acculturation. According to Berry (1997), the first model is assimilation (the melting pot). This model tends to cancel out or minimize all differences between groups and emphasize their common denominators. In this model, individuals are called upon to give up unique characteristics of their culture in favor of adopting the core values of a new one. When individuals such as migrants assimilate, they do not seek to retain their cultural identity; they prefer a new culture, adopting it wholeheartedly by acquiring the language, socializing with the locals, and adopting their lifestyle, and are often encouraged to do so by formal institutions. This model has dominated the acculturation of migrants in the USA (Matton and Maurine 1992). In the separation model, which characterizes most of Haredi society in Israel, it is important for the individuals to retain their culture of origin, and they seek to minimize the interaction with and influence of the new culture.
In the integration model, which characterizes some sections in Haredi society, individuals are interested both in retaining their culture of origin and in interacting with members of other groups. Finally, marginalization occurs when both the heritage and the receiving cultures are rejected (Berry 1997). In the case of the population under study, the Haredi women are clearly required to integrate two different worlds. This study examines how they do it.

**The Setting: Haredi Women and Academia in Israel**

**Haredi Society—General Background**

Haredi society is unique in its culture and lifestyles, both in Israel and worldwide. It is growing rapidly—at a rate of about 4% annually—thanks to high fertility rates. In 2020, it represented some 6% of Israel’s population, and is expected to reach 16% by 2030 (Cahaner and Malach 2020). The Haredi population is among Israel’s poorest, although the recent decade has seen some increase in its labor market participation and income (Agmon 2019). The great majority of Haredim vote for sectorial parties who see to the budgeting of religious and educational institutes and maintaining the segregation of Haredi society from the rest of Israel (Malach 2019). Thanks to consistently high voter turnout and the nature of the Israeli parliamentary system, Haredi parties enjoy disproportional political power, contributing to the difficulty of promoting reforms in the Haredi community, including in the academization area.

**The Academization of Haredi Society**

The encounter of Haredi Judaism with academia has a long history. As early as nineteenth-century Europe, the encounter with secular (in those days, non-Jewish) academia challenged traditional Jews who were devoted exclusively to religious learning. The university environment was considered by many as taboo, as it would expose the Jewish student to promiscuity at best and heresy at worst and create the potential for intermarriage. Nevertheless, many Jewish women gradually started to work outside the home and encounter secular, liberal ideas. In 1917, an educational movement for girls called “Beit Yaakov” was founded, which became an extensive school network throughout Eastern Europe.

Upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Haredi schools’ autonomy was recognized by the government, and state support was provided. Upon graduating, boys would continue with their religious studies in the yeshiva, and girls would go on to study in teacher seminars, formal quasi-academic institutes. Today, Haredi men remain exclusively devoted to religious studies, whereas women study in programs mainly designed to promote their labor market integration and improve their pay as the main breadwinners in the Haredi family. They study mainly education, social work, administration, psychology, and law (Rubin and Novis-Deutsch 2017). In doing so, they inevitably experience a clash of identities (Tal and Yinon 1998). In that respect, it experiences a constant tension between the desire to preserve its
traditions and lifestyle and accept certain aspects of modernity, with various sections within it holding different views and approaches toward that conflict (Layosh 2014).

**Haredi Integration in Higher Education: Encountering Modern Values**

The main characteristics of Haredi Judaism are neo-traditionalism, commitment to religious learning, strict compliance with religious commandments, and obedience to rabbinical authorities and, among certain currents, anti-Zionism (Friedman 1991). In recent years, a certain Haredi sector has grown in prominence. Called “modern Haredim,” they do not have distinct institutions or leadership, but are characterized mainly by a more modern lifestyle in terms of employment, higher education, residential habits, and leisure culture. Nevertheless, for them, and obviously even more so for more traditionalist groups in the community, higher education and doctoral studies in particular represent an intensive clash of two worlds (Cahaner 2020).

In Israel, there are 9 research and teaching universities, and 49 academic colleges engaged in teaching and theoretical and clinical research. All are subject to academic supervision by the Council for Higher Education (n.d.-a). In 2018–19, some 12,000 Haredim studied in all colleges and universities in Israel, representing 8.3% of the student population. Most (84%) of them studied for a bachelor’s degree, of whom 70% were women. Out of the remainder, only 90 studied for a doctorate. Integrating the Haredim in higher education is a key social interest. It is challenging, however, owing to the community’s fear that the encounter with academia may affect its unique cultural identity, among other things. Moreover, given the current nature of Haredi high schools, graduates find it relatively difficult to be admitted to colleges and universities. The Haredi demand for gender segregation also poses difficulties for institutes of higher education. In recent decades, the Council for Higher Education (n.d.-b) has supported 14 dedicated academic settings for Haredim of both genders, which are sensitive to their cultural needs.

Most of the Haredi students studied in academic colleges (55%) and in teacher colleges (28%), and only 17% studied in universities, as opposed to the general student population, of whom a third studied in universities. The age of male Haredi students is higher than average, mainly owing to the fact that they require a prolonged preparatory process in dedicated colleges because of the unique characteristics of their separate education system with its heavy stress on religious studies. Female Haredi students, on the other hand, are younger than non-Haredi students during BA studies, with 45% being younger than 21 years of age. The reason for that is their exemption from military services as well as the tendency to study in academic institutes instead of seminars for girls. In terms of disciplines, more Haredi students study education and teaching (35%) when compared with the entire student population (8%), as well as paramedical professions (12% as opposed to 6%). Few study social sciences, engineering, and the humanities. Somewhat surprisingly, relatively many study natural sciences (11% compared with 12% in the general population (Cahaner and Malach 2019, 31–33).

In early 2022, about half of Haredi men were employed (according to their statements), a rate lower than the target of a government resolution of August 2021, 65%.
Conversely, about 80% of Haredi women are employed, in accordance with government targets. The gaps between Haredi and non-Haredi men and women are particularly high in the leading high-tech industry (3% and 14% percent of Haredi and non-Haredi men, as opposed to 5% and 7% percent of Haredi and non-Haredi women, respectively) (Cahaner and Malach 2021; Peleg-Gabbay 2022).

Recent years have seen a growing phenomenon of “new” Haredim—a group engaged in political activism, with strong presence in digital media and academia, without abandoning their commitment to the community. They are active in both conservative and liberal groups and are increasingly open to integration in general society on their own terms (Haredi Research Group 2022).

Over the years, in order to encourage Haredi higher education, the state provided support for dedicated Haredi tracks and programs in existing colleges and universities. These programs are designed to help Haredi students reduce their knowledge, literacy, and academic skill gaps created because of the unique characteristics of their education system (Ehrenfeld, 2017; Horowitz 2016).

Haredi Women’s Integration in Higher Education: Intersectionality and Coping

Haredi women belong to two minority groups: Haredi society as a cultural minority within Jewish society, and women in Israel. Their intersectional status as a minority means that they are subject to double marginalization (Neria-Ben Shahar 2008). In the spirit of the psalm quoted above, the “gloriousness within” of the Haredi woman is emphasized in multiple ways: in modesty lessons in school, in women-only religious lessons, and in texts in the Haredi press. Commanded to maintain an extremely strict standard of modesty, upon marriage they are tasked with both raising the children and maintaining the household and providing for the family, as the men are (ideally) devoted to religious studies. Thus, they have to support families with many children—68% percent of Haredi women work outside their home, compared with 79% of all Jewish women (Central Bureau of Statistics 2015).

In the past, most Haredi women worked in education. Teaching has a triple advantage for them. First, it is a “natural” ideological continuation of their role as child carers. Second, in performing that role they can be easily supervised, both by the school management and by the parents. Third, the working hours and vacation schedule are suitable for mothers and wives (Friedman 1999). The growing tendency of Haredi women to integrate in the general labor market is part of a broader phenomenon, which includes academic as well as political leadership (Miletzky 2017). According to Schwartz (2008), it was the saturation in the Haredi teaching market that led to the new trend, with relatively fewer Haredi women now being employed in education. Many postsecondary institutions for Haredi young women currently provide technological training in addition to religious studies. Since 2006, several institutes devoted to promoting Haredi employment in the general job market have been opened with government support. To conclude, a quiet revolution is underway. Women’s status in the Haredi family has improved, since they are the ones who hold instrumental knowledge. This is also evident in their growing academic ambitions.
Following Elor (1992), who titled her book *Educated and ignorant: From the world of ultra-Orthodox Women*, Haredi women’s higher education studies have been examined as a way of searching for and shaping a new identity. She argued that Haredi women had an essential role to play in maintaining the Haredi male learners’ society. Therefore, even when they became educated, their traditional status in their segregated society remained identical, and they did not act as change agents but rather as conservation agents. As a result, the conservative elements remained in place. Higher education was there, but it lacked the key aspects of enlightenment: equality, critical thought, modernity, and rationality. These values are inherently contradictory to those of the community. Accordingly, the academization process has been mainly “used” to serve instrumental needs, without addressing essential questions regarding academia and its social role. This study addresses this lacuna by focusing on advanced studies where devotion to research rather than a salary raise is the main career motivation.

Elor’s claim has been criticized, with others claiming that Haredi women’s higher education integration represents a turning point in Haredi society’s attitude toward general education and professional training (Weissman 1995). Among these women, academic studies raise questions regarding their priorities as wives and mothers as opposed to values such as self-realization, career promotion, dedication to work, and professional satisfaction—all associated with secular modern society—and hence many feel ambivalent (Layosh 2014).

A major study of 469 Haredi women studying for their bachelor’s and master’s degrees found that the economic motive was dominant in their choice of pursuing higher education, with ideological motives playing a lesser role. Indeed, most chose to study in religious institutions. One of the main fears they reported was the fear of spiritual religious “decline” (Rubin and Novis-Deutsch 2017).

**The Current Study**

A growing literature has recently been analyzing these trends of greater participation in the job market and higher education, and trailblazing women in media, politics, and society. Nevertheless, studies on Haredi women studying for or with a doctorate have not been conducted, despite the fact that this is an important and growing group as part of these trends.

This study examines Haredi women who have chosen to pursue doctoral studies. Such studies are not available in Haredi colleges, and these women have therefore entered public universities where the culture and atmosphere are modern and secular, there is no gender segregation, and critical thinking is valued. The study examines their experience in this intercultural encounter and their strategies for coping with the tensions it involves. The research has been approved by our institutional ethical board.
Method

Participants and Interviews

Eight Haredi women studying for or with a doctorate were interviewed for this study. All studied in Haredi institutions until the age of 18, and all are mothers (of between one and five children). Three of them are divorced. All studied in Israeli universities; two completed part of their studies in the USA. In all cases, their research areas were related to Haredi society.

Recruiting the interviewees was challenging since, beyond the overall cross-cultural gap, the interviewees have already become integrated in the Israeli academic world, and were not necessarily interested in describing their personal experiences. Initially, the interviewees were selected on the basis of personal acquaintance (convenience sampling), and subsequently using the snowball technique (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). During the interviews, however, we realized that we must also contact specific actors capable of shedding broader light on the issue, including the way academic institutions were preparing to assimilate Haredi students, and we therefore also interviewed a Haredi affairs advisor of a public Israeli university.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews of 1–2 hours were conducted online (by Zoom, during COVID-19) in 2020. The subject of our research was explained to the interviewees and their informed consent was obtained. We also assured their anonymity. The participants were asked to describe their academic experience, the barriers facing them, and the facilitators that helped them cope and succeed. They were also asked what, in their opinion, could help other Haredi women integrate in higher education in the future.

As data on the participants’ characteristics may enable readers to identify them, we have avoided specifics such as their belonging to Haredi subgroups or background in the USA. Most did not mention the specific Haredi community they belonged to and were not asked to. For the purpose of this study, the important thing was to include women educated in Haredi institutions prior to higher education and to exclude women born to non-religious families, and all have met these categories. Note further that whereas it is commonly assumed that the Haredi community in the USA provides more non-religious studies and therefore facilitates greater integration in general society, a study that compared Haredi education in the USA and Israel failed to show any significant differences, at least between Lithuanian–Haredi boys in the two countries (Malach and Ettinger 2021).

Interview Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed in the qualitative phenomenological paradigm. Accordingly, we gathered information about the participants’ personal experiences and sought to understand their meaning for them (Creswell 2007). This information was analyzed on the basis of Moustakas’ (1994) approach. In the first reading, we identified “significant statements” that could improve our understanding.
of the participants’ perspectives. These were grouped into clusters of meaning or themes, for which representative quotes were provided. The themes centered on the Haredi and academic identity experiences and their interphase. For example, statements such as “In the academic world, I realize I had to arrive in full armor” or “It’s hard for me to hear criticism of the society I come from in the university” were included under the theme “The Clash of Haredi and Academic Identities” (Ayalon and Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 2010; Creswell 2007).

Results

“I Was An Outsider among Them”: Haredi Identity

Family and Community Response

In characterizing their Haredi identity, the participants described its complexity and considerable inner diversity, sometimes even within their own families. They described different identities and alienation between different groups in Haredi societies, and their encounters with them. For example, one participant described how surprised she was upon meeting young women studying in a Haredi campus:

I entered a Haredi campus because it was my only way to study […]. I experienced a culture shock upon encountering the Haredi women […] completely in tune with modernity […]. I felt we had no common language, that I was an outsider among them.

Diversity is also evident in their own family background: “My grandfather was a member of [a] Hassidic court, the other grandfather was a […] rabbi […]. My parents met in a co-ed youth movement […] there were encounters with the external culture.” This diversity notwithstanding, the difficulty of realizing academic aspirations within the closed Haredi society was there. A Haredi entrepreneur identified that difficulty and created a dedicated academic setting for Haredi women, currently in the process of expansion to include doctoral studies as well. She said: “Haredi women find it difficult to acquire higher education. I entered this vacuum and paved them the way to develop and actualize themselves academically, without compromising on their faith and identity” (Goldfinger, 2019). Havi Ernfeld—the “Mother of Haredi women students”—tailored a solution for Haredi women students while maintaining a high academic level.

Ernfeld’s activity is important in overcoming barriers to women’s higher education in the Haredi world, since their entry into colleges and universities involves clashes with the nuclear and extended family and the Haredi community as a whole. The participants described this clash in terms of intercultural gaps they needed to negotiate. One way of doing so was to highlight and conceal certain personal details, according to the circumstances of the interaction. Keren (39), for example, confided: “In my children’s PTA meeting, I would conceal the fact that I had a PhD. For them this means I have crossed over the line, it’s a secular word in my community.”
Given their understanding of the way (women’s) higher education is perceived in Haredi society, the participants defined their identity as straddling the two worlds, with the values of each being known to them. As also described in the literature (e.g., Friedman 1999; Robin and Novis 2017), three participants highlighted the perception of higher education in Haredi society as purely instrumental:

Education is a way to improve one’s income […] first as well as second degree. A third degree is already for those who seek knowledge, personal enrichment, and is seen as a waste of time.
The Haredi perception is that the purpose of academic studies is to improve one’s job market status.
The first question I’m always asked is what my doctoral degree adds to my salary.

Some participants described their families as supporting their choice, and some described opposition by their husbands and parents, to the point of a complete change in the entire family’s attitude toward them. “My parents encourage education, but they are bound by the dictates of Haredi society”; “My parents used to be against it, but today they’re proud.”

As mentioned, all participants have children. Among the married ones, the husbands are devoted to religious studies, leaving them as the main breadwinners. The divorced participants, on the other hand, describe how this marital status made it easier for them to enter higher education: “Having divorced my husband, I have crossed a red line in Haredi society anyway, and then it is easier to cross other lines, such as getting a PhD”; “As a single mother, I’m less committed to [community] dictates, since I’m already out of the loop.”

Despite these difficulties, all participants expressed appreciation of the changes and growing openness of Haredi society, and enduring attachment to and appreciation of it. Sometimes, the encounter with anti-Haredi criticism in academia also made their position clearer, deepening their pride and faith in the values of Haredi society. Three participants expressed this sentiment:

I’m not looking to change my way of life. I speak with the Almighty every day. I thank Him for what I have and feel good and comfortable with teaching in a Haredi academic institutes in everyday life.
The Haredim are a willingly segregated minority—nobody forced me into being Haredi.
I believe in the Haredi community—it’s a community that benefits its members.

In a press report titled “Dreams Are Meant to Come True,” the aforementioned entrepreneur describes her activism as promoting the integration of Haredi women into academia while maintaining a Haredi lifestyle. One of the women she helped said: “I have a family, praise be to God, I’m working full time and I’ve made a dream come true. It wasn’t easy, but new horizons have opened up for me.” Another participant in the project said: “I thought this was out of my reach
and I was preoccupied with multiple obligations, but I managed to integrate [all] that with my studies” (Ehrenfeld, 2017). The availability of greater opportunities to begin higher education is reported in a positive tone in the community press, suggesting early signs of Haredi recognition of the ability to combine the two identities in the focus of this study.

**Haredi Identity in the Clash with the Academic World**

As they progress in their studies, Haredi women often experience a tension between the two identities. They are torn between their aspiration to advance in the academic world, which requires adopting a different set of values, primarily critical thinking, posing a potential threat to their religious faith, and community conventions that include strict obedience to rabbinical authority. According to one participant, “The perception of Haredi society is that academia would cause a weakening of faith […]”

The participants continued coping with the challenge of critical thinking as lecturers as well, a role in which they encounter the Haredi fear of higher education in their contact with students: “I explain to the students, the research does not seek to change your worldviews”; “One of the students told me that I had shattered her innocence and that she was sorry that she studied with me.”

Nevertheless, as mentioned, despite now being trained in critical thought, the participants also maintained their commitment to their collective identity: “I have sharp criticism on the party I’m voting for, but there’s no way I’m not voting for it.” Relatedly, they are well aware of the threats to Haredi identity in the encounter with academia, and some are also opposed to wholesale integration of Haredim in higher education: “It’s not good for everyone. […] My daughter got 700 in her psychometric test [at the bottom of the 94th percentile] but she won’t go to the university.” They are also keenly aware of the Haredim’s criticism of academic studies by Haredi educational institutions out of economic considerations. After decades of development, the growing integration in secular higher education competes with the Haredi institutions: “If women will go study in the secular academic institutes, this will hurt the Haredi institutes”; “A Haredi campus is good for my community, because it does not channel the learners to an academic career.”

**“God Brought Me and My Supervisors Together”: Academic Identity**

The participants have gone a long way in defining their identity since entering higher education, acquiring academic tools as well as codes of behavior and conduct. They also experienced the gaps between them and other students in terms of academic skills, and the excitement of the initial encounter with the secular campus and the fears it involved: “I would walk by the university and it would seem like a pipe dream to me”; “I was afraid I would be exposed to heresy”; “In academia, you can always be young.”

Exciting as it was for them, the interviewees were also critical of academia’s attitudes toward Haredi society out of a feeling that campus life involved an attempt
to impose the values of a different culture on them, rather than letting their unique collective find its proper place: “It’s true I had no academic orientation […]. But academia is also unable to speak other languages. The academic system is blind to how much it is uncritical of itself.” In a similar vein, another participant said: “Academia is not truly open to diversity. It’s clear to me that I’m a token Haredi woman for the university; the university is also a token university for me.” Often, they felt criticized themselves: “They invited me to a forum in the Council for Higher Education, to discuss Haredi education, and asked me whether my horizons were opened ever since I began studying with men. I find that patronizing!”

However, on the level of interpersonal encounters with supervisors and colleagues, the participants described both academic and personal empowerment, sometimes even to the point of close friendships and interpersonal openness. All described encounters with researchers who have challenged them intellectually, and provided them with meaningful emotional support for years:

“My supervisors […] helped me all the way, and gave me not only academic support, but also friendship”; “My post is a miracle—God brought me and my supervisors together.”

“I Don’t Meet the Standards of Either World”: The Identity Conflict

The “Meeting” with Academia

The encounter with academia prompted the women to adopt a complex identity structure, reconciling the contradictions between their Haredi and academic identities. It was not always easy for them to explain the academic track of years-long study and research. The curiosity and ambition required to pursue it were incompatible with the expectations of Haredi women. The participants were well aware of this complexity:

I don’t meet the standards of either world, but I’m in the core of both. My life is Haredi, but I have different voices within me. With my academic friends I speak differently about the same subjects […] I have to choose what and how I say in each place, and I must not fail. I move across the identities.

The community also treats their choices as unusual: “I’m on the fence, I love both sides. My mother says that because I don’t have a husband I fell in love with my studies.” Sometimes, the encounter with academia also made them better appreciate the complexity of their Haredi identity:

Until I got to higher education, I was afraid of heresy, of sitting next to secular people, but I never came across things that contradicted Jewish Law. […] Following my studies, there are some things in my world that I disagree with, but this does not affect my Jewish and religious identity.

The Haredi community’s attitude to higher education is ambivalent, combining elements of appreciation on the one hand and aversion and rejection on the other:
The encounter with academia and education is a thorn in the Haredi world’s side, since although the intellectual sphere is not alien to us, academia is perceived as secularization […].

The Haredim admire education, and therefore it compliments my family that I’m a doctoral student, but they’re also attendant to the imperatives of society, that fears the influence of academia.

**The Conflict with the Community and Family**

The choice of higher education also affected the participants’ relations with the community. Despite the obvious gaps, the participants responded to the conflict by creatively forming an integrative identity seeking to contain both identities without compromising on either, in a way that enables a multifocal view of themselves (Andersen 2005; Andersen and Collins 2007). Despite diverging from the conventional life course of a Haredi woman, they are not critical nor contentious, but rather tolerantly accept the community’s attitude: “When I say I’m a doctoral student, they immediately check the length of my skirt”; “When they ask my son what is more shameful, having a divorcee or a lawyer and doctoral student for a mother, he answers that one covers up for the other.”

At the same time, the participants also described having had to deal with years-long opposition to their studies among their family and community. One of them described a difficult relationship with her husband, who was opposed to her studies, but said she did not give up: “I told him he could leave […]. When I’m in academia I feel alive, I couldn’t give it up.”

**Discussion**

This study examined how Haredi women students in higher education shape their academic identity alongside their religious identity and the strategies they use to reconcile the clash between the two. These action strategies were indicative of their interpretation of and attitudes toward the reality of the encounter between the identities and facilitated their negotiation of their two different identities. The findings indicate that the two identities are contradictory in some senses, and complementary in others. Four coping strategies arose from the interview analysis: setting boundaries between the identities; creating an identity with a dual commitment and responsibility; living in a sense of alienation; and identity cohesion. The four strategies are not mutually exclusive, and the participants have used several concurrently and according to circumstances.

(1) **Setting boundaries between the identities.** Owing to the conflict between the identities, the participants set clear boundaries between their social worlds and criticize each only mildly. They see to it that there is no excessive intermeshing of the two worlds and maintain the external characteristics, conversation topics, and social codes typical of each (Ashforth and Meal 1989). Since occasional contradictions are bound to arise, they try to find solutions that would be compatible with both identities.
For example, one participant wanted to investigate issues related to the Haredi world. On second thought, she decided not to undertake a study that could involve her with criticizing her own society. All participants expressed the aspiration to shatter each world’s stigmas on the other. Conversely, one participant described how she enjoyed teaching in a Haredi college: “I feel like in my college I’m in the academic world, but I’m also coming back home.” Thus, the participants experience boundaries between their identities, but at the same time feel they belong to each (Berry, 1997).

(2) Creating an identity with a double commitment and responsibility. The participants adopting this strategy feel proud of their identities and are connected to both. In some cases, they underplay the “other” identity, but when they have a chance to talk about it freely, they feel that they represent the Haredi world in the academic world and vice versa. They also feel committed to opinion leaders in both worlds. For example, they consult with their rabbi regarding their personal decisions, while at the same time consider their doctoral supervisor a professional mentor and source of support, perhaps more than other students do. Moreover, given their “migrant” status (a source of motivation) and preselection (assuming that only the most talented would face the cross-cultural challenge and study for a doctorate), their success rates are higher than average.

Both types of authority are highly appreciated and even revered by the participants. Moreover, their academic experience has made the participants more open-minded about secular society, and they have formed friendships with secular students, which probably would not have been formed otherwise. On the whole, theirs is an identity of commitment combined with criticism—the ability to be committed to and also critical of both worlds enables the students to recognize their two identities (Fearon and Laitin 2000; Toran 2009).

(3) Living in a sense of alienation. All participants referred to their sense of being different within each of the two communities. One of them said, “I’m like a chameleon.” When meeting their Haredi friends, who are all preoccupied with their family and children and far removed from academic pursuits, they feel alien. The same sense of alienation is experienced when interacting with fellow students, many of whom come from academic homes with a higher standard of living and different lifestyle, different family and intimate relationships, and different conversation topics. Thus, in both worlds they constantly feel only partly at home, as there is always some aspect of their identity that is incompatible with their social environment. The resulting sense of alienation becomes inherent to them, and is used as a tool for coping with each world.

(4) Identity cohesion. Approaching their academic career as congruent with Haredi society’s emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning highlights the affinity between the two worlds and identities (although this involves ignoring the fact that the Haredi learner society is an exclusively male society). Inquisitiveness, abstract thinking, philosophical reflection and the constant thirst for knowledge are familiar to learners from the Haredi world. In both identities, there is thus the passion for greater knowledge, involving persistence, commitment, and excellence, which is highly appreciated and rewarded in both worlds. In that sense, the participant repurposed tools and values adopted from their Haredi education.

By definition, Haredi society seeks to remain separate from general society in all areas of life, to obey rabbinical authorities, to sustain independent institutions, and
to rely on the collective and the family for strength (Stern et al. 2022). Nevertheless, Haredim are also interesting in opening up to secular society (Haredi Research Group 2022). This conflict challenges both Haredi and secular society, which needs to integrate within it people who are similar to it in some senses, while maintaining highly traditional ways of life.

Conclusions

Collective identity often contains diverse and even contradictory identity aspects (Hall, 1990; Mosovich and Liberman 2018; Sagy 2006; Shoval 2010). The findings show that the participants’ identity does contain contradictions, but that they have found ways to reconcile them. The participants are ambitious and opinionated women who have sought to develop personally and intellectually through higher education studies. Nevertheless, this is culturally incompatible in Haredi society, and to cope with that discrepancy, they have adopted an alternative narrative, which, although diverging from what is expected of them as Haredi women and which may be even seen as subversive, they employ in a way that also enables them to go on living with their Haredi identity as well.

These women pose a challenge to Haredi society, since adult learning is preserved for men and for religious studies in it. The findings suggest that they have mastered an alternative type of learning, enabling them to develop themselves intellectually and pursue an academic career without breaking the boundaries of their traditional world. The result is a reconciliation of identities, while at the same time creating what may be seen as a radical new world of women who excel in secular studies just as the men excel in religious ones. Anchored strongly in both worlds, the women manage themselves in Haredi society and secular academia with a dual identity that is nevertheless fully coherent. This requires flexibility and constant negotiation, while rewarding the participants with a richer, fascinating, and harmonious life.

The gaps between the Haredi and secular worlds are huge—some would say unbridgeable—but recent decades have seen trends of growing Haredi participation in the job market, and academic studies provide growing opportunities for encounters between the two groups in various contexts. These encounters force the Haredim to find solutions for moving across two different cultural worlds. The State of Israel is interested in such integration, and the interest seems to be mutual. More broadly, the encounter between the communities may reduce prejudices and stereotypes held by the secular community about the Haredi community, and vice versa (Jobani and Peretz 2014).

The present study provides a persuasive example for integration by Haredi women without abandoning their core religious values. They have found a way to open up to the modern, secular academic world, which involves quite a few challenges for them, not only in terms of the curriculum, but also in terms of the need to use the Internet (which is taboo, at least in certain Haredi sectors), traveling to conferences, and international research collaborations. To do so, they have made use of the four unique strategies described above. Their coping processes should be seen as part of broader trends in Haredi society, which, while producing new challenges,
suggest that it is possible for Israeli Haredim to retain their identity while integrating in general society.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

First, relatively few participants were interviewed, even though their number is high relative to the small population of around 100 students. Second, despite the fact that the interview was anonymous, the researcher, who is not Haredi herself, may have failed to detect some of the nuances of the participants’ complex identities. In a future study, it would be advisable to include a Haredi co-researcher or assistant. Third, some of the participants are currently in the process of developing their academic career, and may not have a broad enough perspective to identify the effects of their advanced studies on their identities. It is therefore recommended to follow up on this study by interviewing them again in several years’ time.

In a future study, I recommend examining the prices paid by Haredi women students owing to the constant need to reconcile their twin identities, including loneliness. On a more positive note, it would be interesting to examine the inspiration they provide to their children as women straddling the two worlds. Finally, the study focuses on one side of the intercultural encounter. It is recommended to also interview non-Haredi students who have studied with the participants, as well as lecturers, particularly their supervisors.

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**Conflict of interest** The authors have not disclosed any competing interests.

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