

Book Review: Haredi Masculinities between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics: The Sage, the Warrior and the Entrepreneur by Yohai Hakak

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/02/15/book-review-haredi-masculinities-between-the-yeshiva-the-army-work-and-politics-the-sage-the-warrior-and-the-entrepreneur-by-yohai-hakak/

2017-2-15

In Haredi Masculinities between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics: The Sage, the Warrior and the Entrepreneur, Yohai Hakak offers an ethnographic study of Haredi men and how their interactions and encounters outside of their community are reshaping their experiences and understandings of Haredi masculinity. While he would have welcomed more extensive exploration of some of the more fascinating aspects of the book – including Hakak's own reflections on ethnographic practice – Younes Saramifar finds this a valuable and insightful addition to contemporary studies of Jewish identities.

Haredi Masculinities between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics: The Sage, the Warrior and the Entrepreneur. Yohai Hakak. Brill. 2016.

Find this book: 

The pleasure of ethnographic method is not only about stepping into the unknown or the thrill of observing the known through different perspectives. It derives its fundamental joy from debunking myths and stereotypes. Yohai Hakak has attempted to break free of those surrounding the Haredi community, who are associated with conservative and ultra-orthodox interpretations of Judaism. Hakak has not only studied the community as a scholar, but also became familiar with the intricacies of their lives while directing an acclaimed documentary on the topic. His journey and analysis contains ups and downs that suggest the difficult task of turning a PhD thesis into a monograph.

Haredi Masculinities between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics: The Sage, the Warrior and the Entrepreneur offers an extensive literature review and elaboration of basic concepts researched within Hakak's project. The book acknowledges that there have been studies of Haredi women and issues of gender, but scholarship has not sufficiently considered Haredi masculinities. Hakak therefore challenges monolithic representations and perceptions of the Haredi community by way of Haredi men. He traces how these men deviate from Haredi models of masculinity that are 'part of the official rabbinical discourse' (21) in encounters with the world that the community tries to turn away from.

The pivotal step that holds Haredi masculinity together is the 'Jewish body' (25) across the everyday lives of the minority community that Hakak observes. He shares fascinating observations about Haredi men recruited into the Israeli Defense Forces who struggle with the 'military Zionist masculinity' (41). Hakak identifies how these men appropriate the military corporeal code of conduct in accordance to their faith. He highlights through tales of the postures that represent disciplined bodies the paradoxes of the masculine performances that Haredi men display in their lives as IDF recruits. While Hakak does consider how Haredi men reconcile the everyday realities of their faith and the larger politics of Israeli society, it is unfortunate that this fascinating chapter on the paradoxes faced by Haredi men in the IDF is brief.

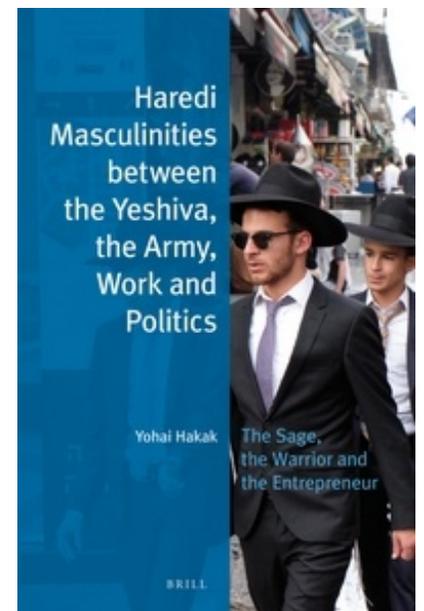




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Hakak also follows Haredi men's encounters with the outside world through the window of work. He finds that men who are traditionally encouraged to become students of Yeshiva institutions enter into new professions and try to reconcile the contradictions between the world within and without. Hakak shares excellent ethnographic anecdotes that evidence his in-depth familiarity with his subjects: for instance, he shows how a simple plastic bag in which students carry their daily lunch to Yeshiva represents their lifestyle. He points at transformations of masculinity via a story that explains how the plastic bag that represents contentment becomes an office bag that displays prosperity by a Haredi man who sought to go beyond the restraints of the community and faith. The ethnographic journey undertaken in these chapters also brings Hakak to walk alongside a political activist from the Haredi community. His informant shows him how some of the men yo-yo between a value system that advocates the betterment of the world through studying the Torah and awaiting the Messiah in contrast with wider Israeli politics and its electoral system.

Hakak adds another element to his conceptualisation of Haredi masculinity by portraying a circular idea of Haredi men. He suggests that we look beyond the traditional value system that constructs Haredi masculinity and examine them in the encounters between the diverse masculinities that Haredi men experience. Furthermore, he stresses how Haredi men appropriate insights and inputs from these encounters, and that this appropriation shapes their Haredi masculinity across their everyday lives. While it seems the journey of being a man becomes complete through this cycle of appropriation, I find this interesting suggestion unsettling. Hakak implies that there is an original Haredi masculinity that the men who he encounters have travelled from. I find it difficult to accept the original starting point of the journey; instead, I see more of an emergence or a constant state of becoming among the men who have shared their stories. This emergence of subjectivities becomes more visible in the last chapters where Hakak adds theoretical models that [Saba Mahmood](#) debated in her discussion on the politics of piety to challenge stereotypes about Haredi women as well.

Hakak explains his struggles while reflecting on directing his documentary among the Haredi to further elaborate his ethnography. The fourth chapter, which is the heart and soul of the book, comes towards the end when he sincerely narrates the difficulties of practising visual anthropology. This chapter not only explains how a professional curiosity can turn into a subject of academic inquiry, but it also shows how Hakak himself is interwoven into the research. However, it is disappointing that this intriguing chapter comes much after the literature review and lengthy debates and citations explaining academic jargon.

Hakak concludes by arguing that 'non-Haredi Israeli masculinity' (200) remains the underlying component of the experience of young Haredi men. This curious and apt statement returned me to the introduction and the theoretical model that the author has followed. I was unable to identify his notion of non-Haredi Israeli masculinity despite the well-referenced and elaborated framework that Hakak sets out in the introduction about masculinities, the Jewish body, Zionism and the 'new man'.

Hakak's insightful ethnography of a minority community within a society in which religion and politics walk hand-in-hand nonetheless offers a well-crafted framework for exploring issues of othering and knowability. This welcome addition to studies of Jewish identities in a changing world will raise questions for those with an interest in the politics of identity and the anthropology of minority communities.

Younes Saramifar, PhD. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, NL. His work concentrates on question of subjectivity, violence, materiality and print culture. He explored the question of materiality of guns and bodies while studying militancy and militants in Lebanon. Currently, he is tracing the convergence of the subjectivity of the author and the reader within propaganda materials. [Read more by Younes Saramifar](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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