

## **Religious vs Secular Education**

What Happens Next – 09.24.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics, religion and current events.

Today's session will be on the secular intolerance for religious Jews.

Our speaker will be Jason Bedrick who is a Research Fellow at the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation. Jason is also the author of the book Religious Liberty and Education. The New York Times had a recent 5-page story about the inadequacies of NYC Yeshiva Schools. This two-year investigation concluded that the students in the most religious schools had inadequate English skills because their classes are taught in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic.

The New York Times concluded that these Yeshivas do not serve the public interest because the kids graduate with few job prospects and little earnings power which is unfair and unjust.

New York State provides funding for the schools and therefore, they argue that the Yeshivas should be coerced into a state mandated curriculum.

Jason plans to rebut the New York Times accusations, and he will explain the animosity particularly by Jewish secular progressive leaders with the most religious Jewish Hasidic sects.

Jason believes that parents should decide how their children are educated and that we should be tolerant of those that choose a religious life.

Buckle up.

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Let's begin with Jason Bedrick's opening remarks.

Jason Bedrick:

The New York Times has waded into the controversy over yeshivas in New York. Last Sunday, they released the results of a two-year investigation looking at a certain subset of Orthodox

Hasidic yeshivas. The vast majority of Orthodox schools are teaching secular studies, but a subset of Hasidic schools that are focused primarily on religious instruction and have about 90 minutes or less a day of instruction in English, language arts, and math.

Essentially the case that they make is public money invites public oversight. The Hasidic yeshivas are performing very poorly as measured by standardized test scores. And they are graduating students who are lacking the basic skills that they need to compete in modern society and dooms them to lives of poverty and dependency. Therefore the government must intervene.

The New York Times relies essentially on anecdote and innuendo, instead of hard data to make their case. We'll start with funding. We're talking about \$250 million, for 50,000 students, about \$5,000 per pupil per year. And most of those funds are actually for non-instructional purposes, for school lunches, transportation, security. Very little, probably between \$1000 and \$2,000 per pupil, is plausibly tied to instructional purposes. Let's compare it to the public school system. The public schools are spending about \$31,000 per pupil.

What about test scores? The New York Times entirely ignores the Regents exams.

The Regents are the exams that all high school students have to take, if they're in the public system and most private school students. The yeshivas perform on the Regents, you'll see that 19 of the top 20 average private school scores in New York's English Language Arts exam were the yeshivas.

They find that a small number of the schools are failing. They point to nine in particular where everybody failed. They don't mention that the rabbis in those schools are not happy about taking the tests. It's a requirement to receive certain government funds, and there's no incentive for them to do well on the test. And so they tell the students you can just fill in the circles and you can come back to real learning and not worry about these government regulations.

If the government should intervene, you have to tell a plausible story that those students would actually be better served by intervention. These are students that are living in homes where Yiddish is the primary language. English is a second language. So let's compare those students to the English language learner students in the public school system. There are 155 schools in New York City alone in which less than 1% of the ELL students were performing at grade level on the 2019 English Language Arts exam. In more than 95% of New York City's public schools, at least two thirds of the ELL students failed to perform at grade level.

There was no evidence that the public schools would be doing a better job serving these students.

I think at the core of this is this question of dependency, are these schools failing to provide the children with an education that will allow them to become self-sufficient adults? And what the

New York Times does is it says that the poverty rates in certain neighborhoods in New York: Williamsburg, Borough Park, and Flatbush are higher than the city average. That's true. You really shouldn't be looking at poverty rates because poverty rates are distorted by family size. The average number of children per households in the United States is just over two, but for Orthodox families, it is 6.5 children.

The poverty rates are going to be significantly higher because poverty rates are calculated based on family size.

Those statistics are distorted. What you really want to look at is income. According to the 2021 Pew Survey, the Orthodox Jewish community outperforms the rest of society. About half of Americans earn below \$50,000 per year, among Orthodox Jews, it's only about a quarter. What about those earning more than \$150,000? That would be 8% of the general population, 26% of Orthodox Jews. Modern Orthodox median income is \$188,000 per year. Hasidic Jews had a median household income of \$102,000 per year about twice the national average.

There just is no case that they are not prepared to operate in the modern economy. At the core of this is really a fundamental disagreement over the purpose of education. For some people, education is about economic value. It's about getting a good job. Others, it's about status. It's about being able to get into an Ivy League school, and that's fine if that's how people want to pursue their education, but there has to be room for people who believe that at the core of education is passing on traditions to your children, having a relationship with God, forming your character, not only to produce good workers or even good citizens, but to produce good people, good friends, good neighbors. Education is about preparing children for adulthood in their community. And in this case, schools are doing exactly that.

Larry Bernstein:

When I read the New York Times front page story attacking NYC Yeshiva schools, it seemed that their most pressing concern was that there were many yeshiva students who were illiterate in the English language.

Jason Bedrick:

I'm glad that you said in English, because a number of people are calling them illiterate and really they're literate in three languages. They're speaking Yiddish at home. They're literate in Yiddish, in Hebrew and Aramaic. They're spending most of the day studying the Talmud, which is written in Hebrew and Aramaic. And this is sort of like a higher level humanities course. It's not rote memorization. It's like studying an ancient legal and philosophical and historical text all wrapped into one, looking at it from different angles, different opinions, studying alongside commentaries, ancient, medieval, and modern.

Some of the top prep schools in the country, they're doing a very similar thing, except they're studying Plato in the original Greek or Virgil in the original Latin. And we say that's a high quality education. In some schools, most of them are speaking English, but they're writing skills are

lacking. But they're acquiring the habits of the heart necessary to spend long hours with a very complicated text look at it from different angles and engage with it.

Larry Bernstein:

One of my favorite TV programs is *The Wire*. Season 4 was on Education which showed a typical inner city public school in Baltimore. It was an utter catastrophe. There was little to no learning going on. It wasn't safe, there was violence between students. Teachers and students were apathetic. There was insubordination, truancy, drugs, and guns. It was a total disaster. How would you compare city schools with Yeshiva schools?

Jason Bedrick:

Look, it's completely different. The *New York Times* said it's a system that is designed to fail. No it's pursuing education excellence. It's just a form of education excellence that is not familiar to the elite. Here are schools that are very tight knit that have a lot of social capital. These are students that have very long days. They start school before the public school kids and they end school well after. By the time you're in middle school, you're there until about five. Many students are returning after dinner for an evening session. These are kids that are highly engaged with education from a very young age and preparing them for a lifetime of learning and education.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, *Religious Liberty and Education: a Case Study of Yeshivas in New York*. This is an edited collection of essays. One essay discusses the work of Amy Gutmann who is the former President of the University of Pennsylvania, my alma mater. Gutmann looks at education from the perspective of the child and not the family. She believes that the state has an obligation to the child to maximize its education and success. Do you agree with Gutmann that the state has a right to coerce behavior even if it is in opposition to the wishes of the child's parents?

Jason Bedrick:

Gutmann has a relatively narrow definition of success. She essentially wants education to prepare children to be like her, somebody who is pursuing a secular academic career. The whole world is open to them. But that's not the way that most people live or want to live. People want to live lives that are rooted very much in a particular community. Any form of education that you provide is going to open some doors and make some other doors harder to open. The question becomes who gets to decide what sort of education children receive. In a modern, liberal pluralistic society, we should defer to parents and communities to be making those decisions.

And there should be a high bar for government interference. Certainly if there is abuse, there is a role for the government to intervene and to protect children.

If they're sheltering them so entirely that they have no access to the outside world, then I think there's a case, but they can see the outside world and they're able to leave the community.

It's not easy in some cases, but there are organizations which I support like Footsteps that tried to ease the transition for those who choose to leave the community.

My trajectory was different. I started in a very secular Jewish home, and I decided to become a Hasidic Jew when I was in college. That was a very difficult experience for me, acquiring Hebrew language skills when I didn't even have a bar mitzvah, some very rudimentary fluency in Aramaic. That was a very difficult process, but look, anytime you are going to enter a different community, there are going to be obstacles to leaving the community left behind and entering the new one. These graduates of these yeshivas, they're able to be self-sufficient, they're able to enter into other fields and succeed. There are certainly obstacles in the way, but not insurmountable. And therefore the case for government intervention is very weak.

Larry Bernstein

There isn't one Hasidic educational tradition. What is the debate between the yeshivas?

Jason Bedrick:

This is a debate that has been in the Jewish community for 2000 years. The Talmud records a debate between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nehouri over this very question. Rabbi Yehuda argues vociferously in favor of Torah, along with teaching your children a trade and some secular instruction, and Rabbi Nehouri on the other hand says Torah alone.

And that your occupational education serves you in your youth, whereas Torah serves you when you're young and when you're old. It's about your true purpose and meaning in life, and that your youth should be spent focused on the highest aspirations, which is your relationship with God, your relationship with your community past, present, and future.

I send my own children to a Jewish school that has a robust secular and religious education. I understand there is some cost, they're not going to get as far in the Talmud, if they were spending full time.

Larry Bernstein:

The former Harvard Professor of Government Samuel Huntington wrote a famous book entitled *Who are We*, and in that book, Huntington argues that it is imperative that as a nation that we seek assimilation, that we speak a common English language and that we teach each generation the key ideas of the American founding. Huntington's concerns were focused on the growing influence of Hispanic Americans but I think he would apply the same logic to the ultra-orthodox Jews. Should the Hasidic be encouraged to assimilate with other Americans or should the state leave them alone?

Jason Bedrick:

I'm a Lubavitcher engaged with the wider world. There are other communities like Satmar, at the opposite end of the Hasidic spectrum that wants to disengage from the rest of the world. Both approaches can justify their position. The question is in our society, is there room for that?

Larry Bernstein:

The NYT's primary attack of yeshiva schools is that the education quality is terrible. Yet, you highlight that for those yeshiva schools that do offer secular studies along with religious training that those students are doing fabulously well. In fact, those yeshiva schools have the best test scores in the entire city. Can you tell us more about the Regents exam and what it is that they are testing?

Jason Bedrick:

English, language arts and math exams. The girls' schools are going to have a secular education who are taking that exam. We see that when they are studying those subjects, they're doing quite well. They're learning the content, and that the level of instruction in those schools is better. It is the whole environment of dedication to learning, the habits of the heart and mind that they are developing. If you're engaging for hours a day, sitting with a partner, talking it out, analyzing it, arguing over the text, you can then take that same form of education and apply it to a different content area and achieve success in that content area.

Larry Bernstein:

Do the kids enjoy the yeshivas? Are they happy with their education?

Jason Bedrick:

There's been some academic research on a variety of different communities and Hasidic Jews score the highest on measures of happiness.

What are we worried about in our society? Bowling alone, atomization, deaths of despair, higher rates of suicide, higher rates of depression, overdose. It's prevalent across society, but it's much less prevalent in Hasidic communities because they have much stronger, tight knit communities, much higher degree of social capital. If they're doing so well on these measures we care the most about, what exactly is the case for the government to come in and intervene? It's a very weak case.

Larry Bernstein:

Should society be tolerant of religious groups like the Satmar Hasidic sect that chooses not to assimilate?

Jason Bedrick:

The true test of tolerance is whether you would want to forbid others from doing things differently from you, or to require them to do the things the same as you. I am tolerant of these communities. I want Satmar to pursue its vision of the good and the true and the beautiful, but I don't share that vision. I take the side of Jewish engagement with the world. Jews are called by God in the Torah to be a light unto the other nations.

That's the view that I take, and that I'm trying to instill in my children, but I'm not going to force my view on others that take a different approach. And I think that in a healthy community, there's room for different approaches.

Larry Bernstein:

We had Iddo Tavory on our What Happens Next Podcast twice. Iddo wrote a book entitled Summoned which is a sociological analysis of a modern Orthodox synagogue in Los Angeles. What was really interesting to me was a description of the congregants walking to synagogue on Shabbat. And they would purposely walk off the main streets because the stores had risqué material exhibited in the shop windows.

Orthodox Jews do not want to be tempted. Non-kosher food, modern technology, even intermarriage. Hasidic Jews want to be separated and they believe that the only way for Judaism to survive and particularly their sect, is to separate from the rest of us.

Jason Bedrick:

There are communities inculcating that sense of separateness, the education is a large part of it. There is a positive and negative case for instruction in Yiddish in part is to separate from the rest of the world. Ultimately, pretty much everybody in the community is going to learn English at least at a very rudimentary level, but the question is, do they need to be speaking English when they're very young? They would prefer that they're very young are not speaking English, but some people think that that's the only reason they're doing it.

Culture is shaped very much by its language. Embedded in language is an entire worldview, which words they use for certain things. The Yiddish language is sprinkled with all sorts of idioms that have their roots in the Bible. Some have entered the English language that most people don't even recognize, apple of your eye, for example. And when you are a minority, particularly a linguistic minority in a broader culture, it requires a tremendous amount of effort in order to preserve that.

There's a reason why the vast majority of Jews no longer speak Yiddish. They want Yiddish not to become a dead language. There are those that speak Yiddish, but outside of Crown Heights where you have some schools that are almost all in Yiddish instruction, most send their children to schools where the only language that they're teaching in is English. You're gonna be reading the text in Hebrew. You're gonna be reading the text in Aramaic, but the instruction is going to be in English. They're trying to keep this language from becoming a dead language and essentially means keep this culture from becoming a dead culture.

Larry Bernstein:

I think that the Jewish secular attack on the Hasidic yeshiva schools that do not do instruction primarily in English is that this is unfair to the children because they did not make this critical life decision that will limit their career options.

Jason Bedrick:

I mean, look, life is not fair. Anything that your parents decide is going to open some doors and close some others. Is it fair to me that my parents decided to give me what they thought was the best secular education that they possibly could? And I wish that I had had a more robust Hebrew education. Maybe I could have been a top rabbi had I been prepared that way. And yet

that was foreclosed to me, but I don't hold that against my parents. My parents were doing the best for me that they possibly could. And I'm incredibly grateful for the education that I received. Parents have very little control at a certain point over the direction that their children go.

There are children in this system that may have been prepared to be rabbis that decide at a certain point, they want to go a different direction. Tiger Woods, some of the top gymnasts, they have parents who push them in a certain direction and to excel in a certain field. But there's a lot of other parents that have pushed their children in those fields and they've had less success. Was that fair for them? If you're going to excel in any field, it requires to be at the top of the top, many of these fields require preparation from a very young age. This is a community that has the Torah at its heart and its core, and they are pursuing their vision of the highest good as they see it. They're going to take their best and brightest and push them in that direction. But at a certain point, the parents have no control. These kids all are aware of an outside world, and they may choose to pursue other fields. You can still then go on and graduate at a secular college. You can still go on and get that medical degree if you have almost an exclusive education.

Larry Bernstein:

How many students in NY State are going to the ultra-orthodox schools that teach primarily in Yiddish versus the more secular yeshivas?

Jason Bedrick:

50,000 are the students that are attending the yeshivas that the New York Times thinks are problematic. In the whole system, there's about 170,000 students that includes students that are going to school yeshivas that are teaching robust secular education.

Larry Bernstein:

This is a lot of kids. I didn't realize that 6% of all students in NY State goes to yeshivas. Wow. Last November in the Virginia Governor's election, education was a big issue. The Republican candidate said that parents should decide what kids learn and the Democrat argued that experts should determine the curriculum. The yeshiva debate reminds of this. Should the parents or the experts decide what gets taught?

Jason Bedrick:

It's a great question. You want it to be a collaborative relationship. There are two different visions of education. There are political battle lines that are being drawn here, but one vision of education is that schooling is essentially an extension of parenting, and therefore the schools at the younger ages should be inculcating children with the values of their parents and the community in which they live. Later, in college, once those attachments have been formed, that's when you start to critique and explore whether we should or shouldn't be doing things this way.

Another view is that we should be deferring to experts tasked with enlightening children, even against the supposed prejudices of their parents. Parents are supposed to be much more deferential and where the teachers even feel empowered to keep parents in the dark about what they're teaching the children. I think that's a very dangerous form of education. We've seen that for a form of education in places like the Soviet Union. It's essentially a revolutionary style of education.

Parents are looking for experts when it comes to what's the best way to teach my child how to read. What they don't want is experts substituting their judgment in terms of values for the parents and they're objecting that the classrooms are becoming politicized in ways that are anathema to parents' beliefs. And they often feel powerless. If they go to the school board, especially in public schools, in lower income communities, where they are essentially a captive audience, they feel that they're not being heard. That's why we're seeing an increasing push for a restoration of the primacy of parents in education, whether that's through school choice or academic transparency. I expect to see more and more of those battles. And I also expect to see parents win.

Larry Bernstein:

What is going to happen in this yeshiva war with NY State?

Jason Bedrick:

At the end of the day, I think the yeshivas are going to win. One group of yeshivas is already teaching secular education and they seem to be doing a fine job of it. The other group of yeshivas is reluctantly teaching secular education and not doing a particularly good job of it.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think there is a compromise that can be reached between the ultra-religious Hasidic groups? I know these yeshivas have little money. What if NY State offered to pay for secular teachers and the Hasidic created an English curriculum with language arts, math and science that was acceptable to them. Could that be a workable compromise for both parties?

Jason Bedrick:

If the state were to take a less adversarial position and offer more assistance that's the low hanging fruit, but they're not going to be willing to accept that a assistance if there is a carrot in one hand and a giant stick in the other. The Orthodox community knows how to circle the wagons. If they feel a threat from the outside, that's exactly what they're going to do.

No bureaucrat in the City of New York is going to get them to comply. They were running underground yeshivas under the Soviet Union on pain of death.

They're not going to be able to force these schools to comply and provide high quality secular education when there's not the funding, not the government control, and not the vision alignment. So they should stop trying, and they should take a more carrot approach. They

should offer funding. They should offer support and expertise, once it becomes evidently clear to the government that they are not going to succeed in forcing compliance.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think this yeshiva fight is at its core a disagreement between orthodox Jewry and secular progressivism?

Jason Bedrick:

I'm Orthodox. I can recognize orthodoxy when I see it. And there is nothing more Orthodox than secular progressivism. The difference is that they are unaware that they are very deeply religious. If somebody who is evangelical hands you a Bible, you both understand what's going on in this situation. They understand that they need to persuade you. But when you walk into a public school classroom and there's a rainbow flag and a BLM flag, frankly, it's no different than a crucifix. This is a form of religion. It is an entire worldview that has now been injected into the classroom. Some of these people are more evangelical than evangelicals, except they don't realize it.

New religions, it doesn't have thousands of years of smoothing out the rough edges. The evangelical understands, we've gone through the crusades, the inquisition and we don't do that anymore. Now we try to persuade. They want to impose their worldview, the secular progressives, certain ones, not all of them, but they want to impose their worldview and no dissent.

Here you have a certain type of Orthodox Jew ostentatiously rejecting that worldview and living in the heart of Brooklyn. And they must be made to comply. They cannot be different than the rest of us. We must impose our worldview, frankly, our religion on them. And that's really what's at the heart of this conflict. It is fundamentally a religious conflict. And the question is, are we liberal and tolerant enough to make space for people who want to live differently than the rest of us? The Orthodox Jews are not saying we should shut down bus service on Shabbat. They're not saying that you have to eat kosher food. All they're asking for is to have the space to live their lives the way they want to live them. And we in the rest of society have to ask ourselves, are we tolerant enough to allow it?

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Jason Bedrick for joining us today. That ends this session. If you missed last week's podcast, check it out.

Our first speaker was Harvey Silverglate who is one of the top criminal defense lawyers in the US and the author of *Three Felonies a Day*. Harvey makes the case that we should abolish the FBI because the ghost of J Edgar Hoover haunts the Bureau making it incapable of being reformed. Harvey believes that a national police force should be created where the purpose is to investigate both domestic and international crimes overseen by a civilian oversight board. I think you will find this discussion to be very provocative.

Our second speaker was AEI Fellow Nick Eberstadt who discussed his book *Men Without Work*. Nick observes that 7 million men who are not employed and not looking for work, despite the fact that there are 11 million jobs available. The decision not to work is a catastrophe for many individuals because work makes you fulfilled and happier, and many of these not working men are depressed and unconnected to their families and community.

I would like to make a plug for next week's show. Our speaker will be Yale historian Paul Kennedy who is well known for his classic book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. This will be the final podcast of his four-part series on the history of World War 2 and next week's show will focus on the final year of the war and the defeat of Japan.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.