

Ultra-Orthodox Israeli men break a taboo by working

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

At the age of 36, Michael Luc realized he needed to find a good job.

Until then Luc, an ultra-Orthodox Jew and father of four in Bnei Brak, Israel, spent his days studying Torah. This entitled him to a small government stipend and an exemption from mandatory military service. His wife, a kindergarten teacher, helped put food on the table.

Within the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, stream of Judaism, the daylong study of Torah and other rabbinic works, such as the Talmud, is a fulfillment of the biblical prophecy in Isaiah—“for the land will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.”

But 52 percent of Haredi families lived below the poverty line in 2014, compared with 19 percent of the population overall, according to Israel’s National Insurance Institute.

“What my wife was earning wasn’t enough, and she was exhausted,” Luc said. “That’s when I decided I needed to work.”

Like the vast majority of graduates from Israel’s insular schools for Haredi Jews, Luc lacked the academic background to pursue a career. He had barely studied subjects such as math and English, prerequisites for most good jobs in Israel. And he had to confront the stigma many in his community attach to men who work, believing that they are betraying their faith commitments.

Determined to feed his family, Luc enrolled in a program at the Bnei Brak Employment Center, which offers intensive, culturally sensitive job training to Haredi men and women, many of whom have never held a full-time job.

During a two-year course of study, Luc learned English, math, and technology and received both vocational training and help finding a job. Today he is a computer programmer.

The employment center is funded by the Ministry of the Economy and works in conjunction with the municipality of Bnei Brak. The government has a five-year,

\$125 million employment plan for ultra-Orthodox men, and the ministry offers financial incentives to employers who hire these workers.

“If these groups don’t participate in the economy in larger numbers, Israel’s economic growth will go backward,” said Michal Tzuk, senior deputy director-general at the Ministry of Economy and Industry and head of employment. “We want high productivity in high tech, the civil services, and in all economic sectors.”

Tzuk emphasized that the goal “isn’t to change” the Orthodox community’s norms or way of life. “We highly respect the value of Torah study.”

To accommodate the prohibition of mingling between unrelated men and women, the center holds gender-segregated classes on alternating days. Classes for men begin in the afternoon to enable students to engage in religious studies in the mornings.

Still, the community’s rabbis have not officially sanctioned the employment center, said David Shechter, the center’s Haredi director.

“You can say we walk between the raindrops,” he said.

Although 70 percent of the community’s women are employed, most are teachers or other low-paid workers. Those Haredi men who do work—about 45 percent—generally perform manual labor or work in retail stores.

Luc said that years of studying religious texts provided excellent training for computer programming.

“Programming is very intense and requires an understanding of complicated processes layered one on top of the other,” he said. “It’s the same mindset.”

Most of the 50 employees at the company where Luc works, Kedum Plus, which offers Web design and digital services, were recruited from the employment center, and 90 percent are ultra-Orthodox. Given that religiously devout families have the highest birthrate in Israel, maternity leave and breast-feeding breaks are built into the business plan.

Seated in front of a computer in a room full of female Web designers, Henny Lampin, a 28-year-old designer and mother of four, said the job suits her.

“It’s close to home; I can run home and nurse,” she said. “There’s a positive atmosphere and motivation here to do our jobs well. I can be myself here.”

Luc is still studying Torah part time, and his wife is able to work fewer hours. Even so, he would like his sons to study Torah full time, without secular studies.

“I believe that if and when they feel the need to work they’ll be able to catch up very quickly,” he said. “Just like I did.” —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on April 26, 2016.*