

Faith, race, and auto-gentrification: What Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities reveal about urban change

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Abstract

Scholarship on urban change has taken race, class, and culture as competing interpretations through which to explain socio-economic change in urban neighborhoods. However, the literature has focused less on religion as a structural factor shaping this change. This article addresses this gap by studying the spatial clustering of Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews in London and New York—a group overlooked by urban scholars despite living near commonly studied sites of gentrification. Under the same structural forces of urban change, this “non-liberal” group actively works to secure space through political deal-making and communal welfare networks which promote the interests of its members over those of outsiders. This account reveals how members benefit from the religious group’s strong internal welfare system and relationship with the state, despite also suffering from housing shortages and unaffordability. Bringing together literatures on race, class, religion, and housing, this article provides a new angle from which to examine how urban communities experience urban change in the gentrification nexus.

Keywords

Haredi, Judaism, non-liberal, post-secular, religion, urban gentrification

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摘要

以往关于城市变迁的学术研究将种族、阶级和文化视为相互对立的解释维度，以阐明城市街区的社会经济变迁。然而，既有研究文献却较少将宗教视为影响此类变迁的结构性因素。针对这一研究空白，本文考察了伦敦与纽约的极端正统派（哈雷迪）犹太人的空间聚集。尽管该群体居住在绅士化研究的典型区域周边，却长期被城市研究学者所忽视。在相同的城市变迁结构性力量影响下，该“非自由主义”群体借助政治斡旋和社群福利网络，积极争取空间资源。这些网络旨在促进其成员的利益，而非外部人员的利益。本文的分析揭示了，尽管该群体成员也面临住房短缺与住房支付能力不足的困境，但他们却仍能从宗教团体强大的内部福利体系，以及其与政府的关系中获益。本文综合了种族、阶级、宗教和住房相关研究，为审视城市社区在绅士化关联体系中如何经历城市变迁，提供了全新视角。

关键词

哈雷迪、犹太教，非自由主义，后世俗化，宗教，城市绅士化

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Introduction

A few years ago, when I first moved to London, I got a job at Bagels and Burgers, a food truck outside Tottenham Football Stadium. I got the job after chatting to the owner of the truck, a friend of one of my housemates, who at 6'7 (2 m) was too tall to stand upright in the truck himself. It went out of business not long after.

The 12-person (not-so) converted warehouse that I had moved into in Clapton was just on the border of Stamford Hill, an Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish neighborhood in Northeast London. The industrial estate I lived on had many Haredi-owned businesses, including G&G, an international chain of Haredi men's clothing with a curtain and carpet factory next door. Palmlane Estates—a Haredi-owned real estate company which (I later found out) owns many of the live/work warehouses throughout North and East London—was down the road (see Saps, 2024). Forklifts and loading trucks beeped in the early hours of the morning. Our front door was a garage hatch with a small door cut into it, and the ceilings featured the same fluorescent lights and suspended tiles as my elementary school. We didn't have formal contracts because us living there was a legal gray area. We later

found out that there was an illegal marijuana-growing operation in the unit above us, something that only came to light when one of the grow lamps overheated and the unit caught fire.

I knew little of the Ultra-Orthodox (henceforth referred to as “Haredi”) world beyond shows like *Unorthodox* and *Shtisel* on Netflix. Over time, my curiosity got the better of me, and I began to spend more time around Stamford Hill. Despite clearly being an outsider, I have managed to develop deep connections (primarily with men) in the largely non-Zionist community, a community whose religious fundamentalism has long placed them outside of political nationalism (Hever, 2023). Many nights (gatherings usually start after 9 pm) have been spent eating cholent, learning *Talmud*, and dancing to the contemporary hits of Lipa Schmeltzer (self-dubbed the “Jewish Lady Gaga”) and Avrum Mordche Schwartz. It is both a privilege and a delicate balancing act to “pass” in these spaces; for researchers that look different, present different, and don't speak Hebrew and Yiddish or have basic knowledge of Jewish practice, it might not be so easy. But other researchers might not be as interested.

The curiosity isn't unique to me. In the northeast corner of Hackney, Haredi families

are very visible in public space; they are out at all hours, men in dark black suits and fur hats (often with transparent bags for the rain), women in long skirts and *Sheitels* (wigs) chatting on stoops at 2 am; children, barely 10 years old, taking their younger siblings on the bus unaccompanied. The streets are overrun with silver Toyota Previa vans and, for those who can show off, Volvo XC90s.

These sights are quite familiar for many people living near the “Jewish neighborhoods” of many Western cities, whether Mile End in Montreal or Williamsburg, Crown Heights, and Borough Park in Brooklyn. That is because in Western Europe and North America, Haredi Jewish neighborhoods—largely established in working-class areas after the Second World War—are often on the frontiers of gentrification/urban change.

Academic and journalistic discussions of gentrification, multiculturalism, and urban change have highlighted the gentrification and “hipsterfication” of many of these areas, e.g. Williamsburg, Brooklyn (Cimino, 2011; Gould and Lewis, 2018), Mile End, Montreal (Bedford, 2015; Rantisi and Leslie, 2010; St-Pierre et al., 2025), and Hackney, London (Davis, 2016; Olorunfunmi, 2018; Sepulveda et al., 2011; Wills and Moore, 2018). Yet few of these discussions even mention the role of the areas’ large Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish communities in this process.

And while the literature on Haredi Jews in Palestine/Israel is extensive (Fenster, 2011; Hartal, 2016; Heilman, 2000; Lintl, 2020; Poniscjakova, 2021; Singer and Bickel, 2015; Tondo and Kirszenbaum, 2024), few studies have situated the unique spatial patterns of Haredi Jewish communities within larger processes of urban change in North America and Western Europe (with a few notable exceptions, namely Deutsch and Casper, 2021). Those accounts that do exist have mostly focused on the US, specifically New York.¹

This article explores how Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews in these areas navigate the larger forces of urban change and displacement in unique ways. The article draws on existing accounts of this “non-liberal” religious community in other cities (Deutsch and Casper, 2021; Fader, 2009, 2017; Flint Ashery, 2019; Goldschmidt, 2006; Valins, 2003), coupled with the writer’s own ethnographic and interview-based research in Stamford Hill, London, to point toward new ways of viewing the intersection of religion, culture, and ethnicity in processes of urban change.

The second section of this article begins with an overview of Haredi history and an explanation of key identity markers including Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Litvish/Yeshivish, and Haredi. The third section analyzes these spatial patterns further, focusing on how the Haredi experience of race, culture, class, politics, and space respectively can present a more nuanced view of how urban change happens. The conclusion draws these strands together, pulling out lessons to better understand the economic and spatial challenges facing urban communities in 21st-century Western cities.

Defining the Haredi community

Traditionally, the location of Jewish communities in cities has its roots in the forced separation of Jews in pre-1700s Europe. In much of Europe (Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Salonica, etc.) and in parts of North Africa (Oran, Casablanca, Algiers, etc.) and the Middle East (most famously Baghdad, which was 25% Jewish by the first few decades of the 20th century), Jews were at the vanguard of urbanization and moved to cities earlier and in larger numbers than other groups. In some instances, the forced ghettoization of Jews (e.g. in Venice) led to the construction of Jews as a separate and oftentimes stigmatized social and ethnic group (Gans, 2008). Once European Jews were formally

“emancipated,” however, many Jewish community leaders, wanting to maintain the community’s religious lifestyle, also supported the ghetto, seeing it as a means to enforce Jewish rituals of belonging (Wirth, 1927).

We see the legacies of this self-segregation today. Some scholars have hence noted that contemporary Jews’ spatial concentration can be better defined as a form of “micro-segregation” rather than “ghettoization” (Bettencourt et al., 2019; Flint Ashery, 2019; Languerre, 2008; Peach, 2012; Ruef and Grigoryeva, 2023). Micro-segregation refers to the self-segregation of certain groups in society who are neither fully assimilated nor fully isolated and for whom no official legal discrimination exists. In Britain, despite most Jews having immigrated over 100 years ago, almost 50% of the country’s 300,000 Jews live in just eight local authorities (Graham and Boyd, 2022: 6). For religious Jews, living in proximity facilitates keeping religious custom. Keeping the rules of Kashrut (Kosher) and of the Sabbath (which prohibit walking, driving, or carrying) means that individuals need to live near each other to access Kosher food and go to synagogue. The presence of *eruv*s (a series of wires connected to allow individuals to carry on the Sabbath and holidays within a designated boundary) makes it easier for religious Jews to live adjacent to community institutions (Watson, 2005).

Haredi Jews take self-segregation a step further. For Valins (2003: 172), the Haredi community “clearly demonstrates how patterns of hyper-segregation remain ... despite ever-increasing global interconnections and processes of hybridization” (also see Massey, 1991). Whereas religious Jews are bounded by religious requirements, Haredim live according to strict conservative traditions and customs such as modest dress and (for the Hasidic especially) speaking the Yiddish language. As such, they are a (proto)typical case study of micro-segregation, where the segregated community rigidly polices the behaviors of its own residents

while offering unique cultural infrastructures for those who adhere to the community’s way of life. For the Haredi, community pressure to live by strict rules and customs is seen as more important than individual desires.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, henceforth called Haredi Jews, are defined by their radical traditionalism; they number over 2 million worldwide and may soon comprise one-fifth of the global Jewish population (in Britain, one in three Jews will be Ultra-Orthodox by 2040) but keep a distance from mainstream institutions. Generally native Yiddish speakers, Haredi Jews, due to the religious requirements of their interpretation of Orthodox Judaism, their strong traditions, and a desire to self-segregate, live in close concentration, with the overwhelming majority residing in cities.

Haredim generally migrated to Western Europe, North America, and Israel following the Second World War, during which the majority of the movement’s followers were exterminated. As such, much of the Haredi worldview is shaped by an attempt to recreate the bygone world of the *Shtetl* by shunning modern dress and continuing to speak Yiddish rather than English or Hebrew (Assouline, 2018a, 2018b). And, however imperfectly, the community attempts to separate itself from mainstream society.

Whereas Haredi society was once spread across Eastern Europe, its post-war formation is a global diaspora territorialized across key sites. As Biale et al. (2017: 740) explain in perhaps the most comprehensive study of (specifically Hasidic) Haredi Jews:

In the post-Holocaust period, the movement took on a worldwide identity and evolved common characteristics. Taking advantage of car and air travel, Hasidim became highly mobile, engaging in worldwide trade, contracting marriages internationally, and traveling long distances to celebrate family events and religious festivals.

The global Haredi diaspora transcends borders but is defined by a desire to separate itself from

modern society “through limited interactions with non-strictly Haredi Jews, insular communal and welfare programs [sic], resistance to the secular media, and most obviously through style of dress” (Valins, 2003: 161). Another thing which sets them apart is their astronomical birth rates, estimated at 6.5 women per children (Staetsky, 2024); one of the highest birthrates of any group in the world.

Given the frequent movement of people, capital, and ideas across borders, the way that local Haredi communities operate in a place like Stamford Hill shares many similarities with places like Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Indeed, to study one Haredi community in isolation would be to miss the big picture. For this reason, this article focusses on Stamford Hill, London’s Haredi community (numbering about 40,000), while often drawing on comparative examples from the much-larger communities in New York (which number over 300,000; UJA Federation New York, 2023).

Despite the translocal character of this community, there are some notable spatial and political differences; for instance, Haredi communities in Israel–Palestine hold citizenship within an apartheid state which promotes Jewish settlement.² For this reason, the article focusses primarily on North America and Western Europe, and specifically the two largest Haredi communities there: London and New York.

As Flint Ashery (2019: 123) notes in a study on Stamford Hill—London’s Haredi enclave—the community follows unique “non-liberal spatial patterns”, meaning that Haredim in the UK “use the rights and practice of planning to achieve sectoral goals”. More broadly, though, the term might be extended to refer to communities which value maintaining and advancing the sectoral aims of their own group and/or their own culture/tradition/religious practice; this often takes precedence over individual liberty and the common good of broader society (Aburabia, 2024; Mandache and Kopper, 2025; Mizrachi and Weiss, 2020). By viewing

their affiliation as primarily toward the global Haredi diaspora and the local community, Haredi groups challenge many of the individualist assumptions of fine economic and cultural analyses of urban change.

The spatial patterns of Haredi Jews can point toward a new way of understanding how non-liberal groups relate to urban space. As Goldschmidt (2006: 13) points out, by insisting on the uniqueness of their God-given practices, sectarian religious communities disrupt the performative equality assigned to different racial, ethnic, and religious groups in Western cities. Understanding the specifics of how the non-liberal Haredi—both in London and other Western cities—navigate urban change can help push beyond racial, economic, and religious analyses of gentrification.

Urban change in the Haredi city

The previous sections introduced Haredi communities and their cultural, religious, and spatial patterns. Haredi Jews maintain close-knit religiously conservative communities in the middle of multicultural Western cities. Haredi communities’ micro-segregation adjacent to gentrifying areas calls for a deeper look at how members carve out a space within the city and grapple with the demands of urban life, something which will help bring together competing strands in the urban change literature.

This section explores five aspects of how Haredi communities operate in the city. I first explore how Haredi communities have been racialized by Western societies, both in American and British contexts—presenting Haredim as an “off-white” group (in the American context) or as “good immigrants” (in the British context), as I trace how Haredim are increasingly identifying with American and British ethno-nationalist identity. The following section looks at housing, the most important material issue for the community, given the large families and small apartment sizes. I then look at how the

group's cultural and religious customs shape how they move through space—outlining the group's unique “theography” (Sutherland, 2017). The following section looks at property ownership, examining how landlordship in the Haredi community can challenge many economic analyses of gentrification. The subsequent section examines how the community's internal infrastructure allows it to develop a transactional relationship to the state—in this case Haringey Council—mobilized to push for policies which benefit the community. Finally, I chart how, despite the community's attempts to preserve the neighborhood, large birthrates and market pressures are pushing young families out, a process I term *auto-gentrification*. Taken together, these analyses aim to bring together competing strands in the gentrification literature, looking intersectionally at how race, class, culture, and religion overlap in shaping urban change in the 21st century city.

Race and Haredi communities

The view of gentrification as a race-based process of change has featured heavily in cultural debates around systemic racism and racial capitalism in North America.

Gentrification scholars like Zimmer (2022), for instance, consider the racialization of space as a process by which ideas about a place are formed according to racialized understandings of the people who live there. This focus on racialization of space has also been discussed by Rucks-Ahidiana (2021: 2722), who explained that “racial composition influences not only whether gentrification occurs, but *how* gentrification unfolds.” Similarly, Kent-Stoll (2020) has used the framework of settler-colonialism to explain the commodification of space and the dispossession of the people who inhabit it.³ This section provides an introduction to the debate on race and gentrification, examining how Haredi Jews in America and Britain have historically fit into categories of

“black vs white” and “immigrant vs native” as well as how those identities are changing.

In the United States, one concrete example is the history of federal racial “redlining” policies which kept urban neighborhoods segregated, with white areas more likely to receive investment and mortgage loans (Hillier, 2003; Nardone et al., 2020; Swope et al., 2022; Zenou and Boccoard, 2000). In the UK, reports like the one recently commissioned by the Runnymede Trust have found that while working-class Londoners of all races share the experience of gentrification, Black and minority ethnic (BAME) neighborhoods in London are more likely to gentrify, with its residents pushed to the margins (Almeida, 2021). And while much of Haredi identity is global, Lees (2016: 209) reminds us that the way racial positioning is experienced is different in the US and UK: “this US-centric model of white gentrification of low-income blacks is more problematic in a country like the United Kingdom, where ethnic relations are culturally very different and changing as we speak due to increased immigration.” Despite differing cultural contexts, the recent gentrification literature has generally favored a race-based interpretation of urban change, ignoring the parallel role that ethnic and religious tradition can play in shaping a community's spatial patterns and socio-economic position. Here, I seek to examine where Haredim might complicate this model of gentrification.

In a study of the Chabad Hasidic Haredi community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Goldschmidt (2006: 13) reflected that:

Hasidic resistance to the hegemony of race reveals the conceptual and political limitations of such fashionable concepts as “multiculturalism” and “diversity”—concepts that claim to celebrate difference yet only accommodate differences of certain kinds.

In this sense, race-based views of group difference often see race as a barrier to overcome, rather than as a fixed immutable divider; by

contrast, the Haredi, who often see the world in terms of “us v. them”, see living apart as divinely mandated and are resolute not to integrate into mainstream society.

For the Haredi communities of Brooklyn, residential practices differ markedly from those of other white people, particularly racialized minorities—a topic extensively examined by Deutsch and Casper (2021). For Feldman (2023), Haredim occupy an in-between position being “off-white,” due to their resolve to remain separate from white American society. While many secular Jews embraced the social mobility and suburbanization that “whiteness” afforded them in the 1960s, Haredim did the opposite; they remained in inner-city areas and thus differentiated themselves from their non-Haredi co-religionists (Deutsch and Casper, 2021: 11).

At the same time, Williamsburg’s Haredim sometimes strategically deployed the language of American racial politics to be considered a disadvantaged racial minority and thereby be eligible for specific government funding (Deutsch and Casper, 2021: Ch. 3; Feldman, 2023), despite (with a few exceptions) generally being less affected by redlining that affected Black and Latino populations in American cities (Hillier, 2003; Nardone et al., 2020; Swope et al., 2022; Zenou and Boccard, 2000.) In the media, the racialized depiction of “welfare queens” and “ghetto thugs” by American politicians in the 1980s and 1990s didn’t exactly apply to Haredim, even if their style of dress, lifestyle, language, and presentation was different than those of other white Americans. More recently, however, the broader embrace of Trumpian politics by many members of the American Haredi community raises questions about whether Haredim have begun to identify more with the broader nativist American political identity (Deutsch, 2017).

Similar trends played out in Britain, where in the late 20th century many mainstream Jews moved to the suburbs of Northwest London and Essex, while many Haredim stayed in their corner of Northeast London, an enclave which

has now expanded north to South Tottenham in the nearby Borough of Haringey (Haringey Council, 2024.) To the south, the Stamford Hill area is adjacent to Stoke Newington and Hackney, superdiverse areas home to Kurdish, Turkish, Caribbean, and South Asian communities (Wessendorf, 2014) which are described as sites of gentrification in both the academic literature and media (Bullard, 2023; Davis, 2016; Rossen, 2017.) As such, given their general lack of university education and general work in trades or buying and selling, many Haredim in London have more in common with the groups around them than with the middle-class suburban culture of mainstream Jewish neighborhoods like Golders Green or Hendon.

In the same way that Haredi communities in the US are increasingly identifying with the MAGA right, many in the Haredi community of Stamford Hill have also seen a marked shift toward aligning with anti-immigration parties like the Conservative Party and, recently, Reform UK. This might reveal a broader identification with “native” Britishness rather than the immigrant identity. Whereas Stamford Hill’s local elections once yielded a mix of Labour, Liberal Democratic, and Conservative councilors, all six Haredi members of Hackney council are Conservative, a trend which has only accelerated in the last 10 years (Sall, 2024). Indeed, when interviewed for this research, one Haredi councilor in his early 30s who represents the Conservative Party in Hackney Council explained this identitarian shift: “most of the communities here are technically descendants of immigrants, so this is also an interesting contradiction. And yet we’re gonna be pro-Reform because immigration has spiraled out of control.” He further explained that these politics are more present in the younger generation, who are more on social media and are thus more captivated by the global right: “People see figures like Nigel Farage who has a very strong media presence and a very strong marketing presence in the same way as Orthodox people in America see



Figure 1. A tweet by Rupert Lowe, Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth.

Trump.” The “native” British identity here is not synonymous with “whiteness”; indeed, large numbers of Haredim appear to be following in the footsteps of politicians like Priti Patel, Suella Braverman, Rishi Sunak, and Kemi Badenoch in championing what Les Back (2024) calls “diversity conservatism” (also see Jazeel, 2025). But the embrace of anti-immigrant and, sometimes, anti-Muslim rhetoric comes with risks. For instance, Reform MP Rupert Lowe, who openly espouses anti-Muslim rhetoric, has pledged to ban Halal and Kosher slaughter in Britain (Lowe, 2025), something which would curtail Haredim’s access to sanctioned food (Figure 1).

Despite Haredim’s growing alignment with ethno-nationalist parties, further analyses should explore their spatial patterns in comparison to other racial groups, specifically in London. If we follow Rucks-Ahidiana’s (2021) analysis that white working-class areas have gentrified more than non-white areas, where does that leave Haredim, who are white-presenting and (typically) working class but have nonetheless been resistant to integration? In the next section, we will look at how culture and religion shapes how Haredim experience day-to-day urban life. This will lay the groundwork for an analysis of how Haredim actively negotiate to shape the areas around them.

Religion, postsecularism, and Haredi theography

Despite the dearth of literature on Haredi urbanism—and of religious urbanism more

broadly—cultural transition has featured prominently as one of the key causes and effects of urban change. This section extends that analysis to look at the role of religion in “post-secular” Western cities; a topic which has seen renewed attention (Baker and Beaumont, 2011; Goh, 2011.) The growing literature on postsecularism, particularly when applied to Haredi communities, can help urban scholars better situate religious practice within their analysis of neighborhood change.

Indeed, the literature on gentrification and religion has traditionally focused on the secularization of cities that accompanies gentrification, which effectively excludes older, religious residents from the new culture of the area (Kern, 2016; Ley and Martin, 1993: 442). But this analysis ignores the profound role that religion and faith play in shaping contemporary urban politics (Cimino, 2011; Costa, 2022; Kaltsas, 2019; Wilford, 2010). Drawing on Habermas (2006), Baker and Beaumont (2011: 17) argue that “the postsecular city, by contrast to the utopian liberal uplift of the secular city ... reflects a more contested space where hitherto distinct categories are increasingly converging within a post-metaphysical composite.” New forms of religious practice can emerge in urban multicultural environments, paving the way for the integration of people of diverse backgrounds around common religious practice (Glynn, 2002). Accordingly, scholars like Sutherland (2017) have advanced concepts like “theography” to spark more nuanced discussions around how religious subjects move through space; a concept which I will use in this section.

But while multiculturalism and diversity can be a point of pride for the middle class (Albert-Blanco, 2018: 293), “the public presence of some religious minorities is rejected by dominant social groups who consider it a source of urban degradation and as an incompatible element with the supposed secular uses of public space,” something also pointed out in Goldschmidt’s (2006) account of Black-Jewish (specifically Caribbean and Chabad

Haredi) relations in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Such clashes over the role of religion in public space have been cited in debates over eruvs in Jewish neighborhoods of Western cities (Watson, 2005) but also, more contentiously, regarding Mosque building, Muslim burial grounds, and the Muslim call to prayer (Earle, 2015; Pfeifer, 2022; Weiner, 2020). In line with this, other scholars have written on the problematic relationship between religious membership and encounters with those of non-hegemonic LGBTQ sexualities (Andersson et al., 2011; Perkins, 2023).

Whether religious or not, gentrification often leads to clashes about whose culture is represented in the new neighborhood. This was most evident in the 2000s, when Brooklyn's Haredim feared the secular licentiousness brought by the incoming *artistn* (artists). This culminated in the so-called "war against the *artistn*" (Deutsch and Casper, 2021: 162–198), where a community edict forbade members of the community from renting to the newcomers. Haredi neighborhoods offer a tight-knit religious life with community hubs like shops and synagogues. But city living ensures exposure to outside people, ideas, and cultures. Whether they walk by an LGBTQ pride parade (Boockvar, 2023) or access the internet at a public library (Fader, 2017), Haredim are confronted with the non-Haredi world every time they leave the house.

But residential location and moving through space in Stamford Hill are shaped by religious norms, customs, and expectations. For starters, the strict dietary requirements of keeping Kosher require living close to Kosher supermarkets—such as Hype or Carmel—so much so that the local Morrisons and Sainsbury's (now closed) sell Kosher meat certified by Kedassia, the locally respected Kosher supervisory organization (see Saps, 2023). Laws prohibiting driving on the Sabbath and holidays mean that families must live within walking distance of synagogues; especially considering

that men often pray three times per day there.

There are other spatial boundaries too. For example, for many families, living within an eruv, a series of telephone wires that allows carrying on the Sabbath and on holidays, makes life easier, particularly for women, who are otherwise unable to carry their children outside the home on those days (the eruv is a contested boundary in the strictest of Orthodox groups). And indeed, property rental listings circulated on community WhatsApp groups often advertise properties as being within the eruv; a marker that would be meaningless to an outsider. Indeed, within the community, it is commonly understood that doing something which breaks religious law is more harmful if done inside of the neighborhood in full view of others; if done in public, the act is legitimized and might corrupt others (for more on Haredim leading double lives, see Fader, 2017). Indeed, in one instance, when a Rabbi's children saw me riding a bicycle in Stamford Hill on the Sabbath, the Rabbi explained to me that he didn't care what I did in my private life but breaking religious law in plain view could be a bad influence on children (Figure 2).

Attempts to preserve the neighborhood's "morals" (as will be explored further in the next section) are also a common topic of concern. Indeed, one billboard across from Clapton Common, placed there by the organization Einayim (Hebrew for Eyes), shows a builder with a hard hat and his eyes closed with text in Yiddish reading "one less look" (Figure 2), encouraging passersby to look down when they are walking so as not to see anything corrupting. In fact Einayim is based in New York, revealing how local ideas and spatial patterns circulate translocally. Whether it is the public performance of piety or in keeping within the eruv on religious holidays, Haredim in Stamford Hill have a unique "theography" which shapes how they experience the city (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Tower Court housing development in Stamford Hill with a sign (bottom right) warning locals to be aware that they are about to exit the eruv boundary.

Source: Author.

Looking at Haredi “theography” can provide a postsecular lens through which to examine how groups experience the city. The literature on postsecularism points toward a need to look at religion as an all-defining feature of everyday life; one which affects that group’s experience of the city and that of groups living alongside them. In the next section, we will see how the community’s insular distinction between in and out—seen by many as a religious requirement itself—shapes relationship to property, rent, and the home.

Moving beyond the rent gap: Haredi landlords and preserving the neighborhood

Classical scholars of urban change, such as Smith (1987), have looked at gentrification as an economic phenomenon, specifically as what happens when incoming renters are



Figure 3. The aforementioned sign across from Clapton Common, Stamford Hill.

Source: Author.

willing to pay more money for a property; landlords let the property out at a higher rate which drives out poorer tenants. In this section, I show how the Haredi community’s practices challenge this model; and how community pressures, not just profit maximization, can shape landlord behavior.

Smith’s rent-gap theory has been immensely influential for scholars focusing on the economics of urban change. For Smith, neighborhood change happens when the potential price of land is greater than the actual amount of rent exacted from that land. But as Wyly (2023) explains, the theory has been critiqued for its limitedness as “an economically deterministic tool suitable only for the study of inner-city land parcels in certain types of deindustrializing cities of the Global North”; admittedly, the type of cities and neighborhoods which Haredim often inhabit. Nonetheless, unlike cultural or racial understandings of gentrification, Smith’s model presumes a liberal economic framework; he assumes that landlords will always act in ways that maximize their own profit.

I argue here that the unique “non-liberal” spatial patterns of Haredi communities (Flint-Ashery, 2018; Valins, 2003) challenge assumptions about capital relations in the Global North itself.⁴ One example is the

assumption that landlords are always inclined to extract the maximum economic value from a piece of land. This fails to consider how community norms may affect individuals' economic incentives. Dennis (1997) explained how "for Jews in Toronto in the 1900s, identity centered on kin and neighborhood more than tenure," and Jewish landlords actively sought to preserve the neighborhood by renting to people from the community. These patterns still hold for close-knit non-liberal communities like Haredi Jews where "the relatively high involvement of the leadership in the community's daily life leads to a residential concentration of Haredi communities within walking distance of the community's religious institutions and overcrowding in these areas" (Flint Ashery, 2019: 93; see also Flint-Ashery and Stadler, 2021). Within the community, social factors, namely which sect individuals belong to, can impact residents' locations.

A prominent example of how Haredim try to preserve the "morality" of their neighborhoods concerns the aforementioned "war against the artists" waged by Williamsburg's Satmar Haredi community in the 2000s. In response to the potential "moral corruption" newcomers were bringing, many community organizations led a campaign to dissuade community landlords from renting or selling to *artistn* (as artists were called), threatening them with public shaming. The threat was also economic: many working-class Haredi families, due to rising costs of living and high birthrates, couldn't afford the rising rents that accompanied art-fueled gentrification. It is true that some Haredi (commercial and residential) landlords defied the campaign and profited from renting out industrial warehouses to the artists. But the edict's widespread effect on the local housing market reflects how landlord behavior can be shaped by community pressures.

In addition to letting rules, the community's tight community structures—and the

international connections to Haredi communities abroad—might allow for capital pooling at scale or increased resource sharing. Studies of ethnic community businesses (Kitching et al., 2009; Schuch and Wang, 2015) in the UK and US suggest that the multinational networks associated with diaspora, coupled with the cohesiveness of the community, allow those businesses to grow together and access resources not available to others. For Haredim, economic ties between different communities have allowed them to pool capital and share knowledge across territories.

As Flint Ashery (2019: 9) describes:

many Haredi communities control an array of financial resources and services donated by community members located throughout the world. These funds finance an extensive system of service provision attuned to individual and family needs in the areas of education, marriage (including apartment purchases for newlyweds) and welfare.

Research on the Haredi diaspora and Stamford Hill's Haredi community suggests similar trends. Informal estimates verified by several community members suggest that only about 5–10% of the community own their own homes. A Haredi friend who works as a builder for local landlords explained that there were four or five families that, in his words, "own all of Stamford Hill," with the wealthiest families clustered at the top of Spring Hill around Clapton Common. Much like in New York, Stamford Hill's Haredim—likely with the help of investment from relatives and associates abroad—also invested in cheap properties in and around Hackney in the 1960s and 1970s. But over time, this created segregation between the haves and have-nots. As a Stamford Hill councilor explained in an interview, most people who work are adjacent to the property business in some way. For instance, they might work as a property agent or as a property manager. Or they might be a builder doing maintenance on a landlord's property.

But while landlordship might have been a common business when Hackney was more affordable, the cost of buying a house in Stamford Hill itself is too high for young people to afford, especially when the average family might have seven children. As a prominent community businessman explained in an episode of a local podcast called *Pushet Pshat* (Pushet Pshat, 2025a), buying in London is very difficult without family wealth and the younger generation is increasingly unable to own homes.

Most young families rent, live in council flats, or live in houses owned by housing associations. But even with renting, many Haredim are at an advantage within the neighborhood. In this case, the culture strongly favors keeping the community together. If a landlord has an empty flat in Stamford Hill, they will usually lease it to a family that they know or at least advertise it on community forums like synagogue bulletin boards or WhatsApp statuses; or it may go through word of mouth. And the culture of helping others (members are obligated to donate 10% of their income to *Tsedaka*, i.e. charity) in the community means that young people are often supported to start a business and find an apartment through local charities like Satmar Gemach. Indeed, while Smith's rent-gap theory may imply that a landlord is incentivized to let or sell a local property to the highest bidder, a Stamford Hill Haredi landlord may prioritize letting or selling the flat to an insider.

One July evening, as I walked with Jacob, a friend of mine who grew up in Stamford Hill, I was asking him questions about the property industry. One of Jacob's side hustles is working as a *macher*, a middleman in the property industry. He explained to me that:

you have to go outside to find good deals and bring them into Stamford Hill. If someone in Stamford Hill is selling a house, probably he won't sell it to you. Probably he will sell it to his friend from *shul*.

The case of Haredi communities in Williamsburg and Stamford Hill reveals

how community cultures and pressures can affect the sales and rentals of property. After all, as much as many other areas of Hackney and Haringey have been gentrified, Stamford Hill's community has stayed put. In this sense, the case of Haredi communities points toward a deeper understanding of how non-liberal communities in the Global North are able to preserve the integrity of their neighborhood amidst urban change. As the next section will chart, the community's tight-knit structure allows for collective political mobilization and dealmaking with the state to push for preferential planning policies and housing selection. But as the following section will explore, the robust community networks of the Haredi world are no match for its rapidly growing population as the younger generation is increasingly unable to afford to stay local.

The state and social welfare

Scholars of race and gentrification have often pointed to the active role of the state in promoting both spatial segregation and regeneration, chiefly through redlining and the demolition of public housing (Hillier, 2003; Morris, 2019; Watt, 2021; Zenou and Boccard, 2000). As Goetz (2011) explains in his analysis of race and public housing demolition, state investment has been a key driver of gentrification in Western cities since the 1990s (also see Andersson and Turner, 2014; Fernández Arrigoitia, 2018; Morris, 2019). This is especially evident in the realm of state-assisted housing, in which Haredim often live both in the US and the UK. This section examines how Haredi communities negotiate with the state to secure benefits for their communities.

Deutsch and Casper (2021: 43) detail how, by contrast to other working-class Jews in New York, Haredi leaders in 1960s

Brooklyn played federal and citywide anti-poverty programs, specifically relating to public housing, to their advantage, noting that “the new buildings that had enabled Hasidim to remain in Williamsburg were not single-family homes, brownstones, or co-op apartments. Instead, they were high-rise low-income public housing projects.” Brooklyn’s Haredi communities cited their unique religious needs (chiefly that of not being able to use an elevator on the Sabbath and holidays) to receive certain preferential units—namely those on the ground floor, sometimes with two sinks for milk and meat.

In London, a 2010 report found that over 50% of the community receive state benefits (Interlink, 2010), which is often necessary in order to maintain large families. This is also true in New York, where “50% of the Haredi community live below the poverty line” (Stolzenberg and Myers, 2022: 34) and many receive state benefits as a result. Indeed, as Flint Ashery (2019: 98) explains:

Since low income and family size is the primary criteria used by the welfare state in defining eligibility, the Hasidic community of Stamford Hill is one of the most heavily supported British Haredi communities.

In Stamford Hill, the main form of social welfare is Housing Benefit. In fact, as Abraham, who grew up in Stamford Hill, explained, the community’s entire fabric rests on a foundation of state social welfare. So much so that even for wealthy people there is always some way to get money from the state and an elaborate economy of *shtiks*—scams—to keep it that way. As Jacob further elaborated, “if someone owns a house, maybe it’s in his brother’s name. Or maybe couple aren’t legally married so that to the state, there’s a single mother with 7 kids.” Indeed, the benefits industry is so robust that the local Yiddish-language podcast *Pushet Pshat* did an episode discussing

state welfare with Aron Mordecai Lubelsky (Pushet Pshat, 2025b), a benefits consultant who helps people from the community legally maximize the amount that they receive from the state. At the same time, Lubelsky explained that the culture in the community is shifting away from taking state benefits as the community becomes wealthier and more established. This is not to imply that there is no need for state benefits. Without a doubt, having large families is a tremendous burden which requires assistance. But a transactional approach to securing state assistance and social welfare is what allows Haredim to have large families and stay in the local area.

Key to this has been the community’s long transactional approach to politics, which draws on an old country concept of *Shtadlanut*. Having interviewed many community leaders, I see that there is a method to it. The community puts forward the most charismatic and connected members to negotiate on behalf of the community. As Abraham explained in an interview, Haredi Jews still operate with the political mentality of the “old country”:

What the Jews were doing is they send a specific influential person who was well versed and could well, talk well, did come with handsome bribes and handsome gifts and they’d tell the ruler, look, it’s in your interest. We’ll pay you the taxes. So your interest will be to not kick us out. Transactional.

And indeed, there is still the long-held transactional approach to local politics, where politics are seen as a transactional matter—something which is dictated not by individual belief but rather by how the community can best secure their interests.

One way in which this manifests is through housing, provided through associations like Industrial Dwelling Society (IDS) or Agudas Israel Housing Association (see

Clare et al., 2022). Many housing associations are funded by grants from local councils (Hackney and Haringey in this case) and also by members of the community (an example of internal redistribution); at the same time, they may legally give preference to local Haredi families.

But the community sometimes also works with the council to secure adequate housing for its members as well. A key example is the Tower Court development, just off Clapton Common in Stamford Hill, where Hackney Council purpose built a new social housing development co-designed with large Haredi families. The housing development, which recently won the 2025 Housing Design Awards and was shortlisted for the Civic Trust 2025 Special Award for Community Impact & Engagement, has several key features designed for the community; for instance, the balconies are staggered so that residents can put a Sukkah on them during the holiday in September/October (Figure 4). Kitchens typically have two sinks—one for milk and one for meat—and living rooms are designed to display large bookcases, as is common in Haredi homes. Similarly, the common courtyard in the middle is designed for children's play. Although only about 50–60% of the residents are Haredi, the design of the development—adjacent to prominent community institutions like the Satmar 26 synagogue (the largest in the area) and Belz primary school—makes it a prime location for members of the community to access local institutions. Here, the Haredi community has secured targeted assistance from Hackney Council. Indeed, the design is innovative and culturally sensitive, but when Hackney Council advertised the design on their Instagram page (Hackney Council and Adam Khan Architects, 2025), the post triggered some comments suggesting that the community was receiving preferential

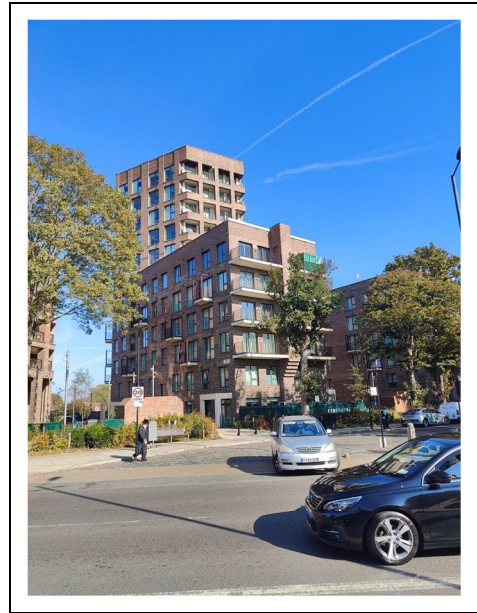


Figure 4. The Tower Court housing development, with a Sukkah on a balcony (top right).

Source: Author.

treatment, such as “Let’s see if Hackney sprang the same amount on Kingsmead estate and the windrush decedents.”

Another example of community deal-making comes with securing legal permission for housing extensions. Around 2013, key members of the Haredi community, including councilors Mark Grosskopf, planner Shulem Posen, and community activist Motty Pinter, worked to create a Special Planning Document for the South Tottenham area of Haringey (considered to be within the neighborhood), an area with a high presence of Haredi families (Beneath the Surface, 2022). The British planning system makes building large extensions quite difficult, but the Haredi community argued that to avoid overcrowding given the large families, the South Tottenham area ought to be given an exemption (Haringey Council, 2013). The document

gave special consideration to “the circumstances of the established Charedi [sic] Jewish Community in South Tottenham, where there is a need to provide accommodation for large families” (Haringey Council, 2013: 5). As such, the document outlines three ways in which houses in the area can be extended upward, with the third type being adding a full top floor with a roof extension, something virtually unheard of in other parts of London. This level of special consideration paid to the overcrowding in the area is a product of effective lobbying of Haringey Council by community leaders. It has also raised the value of homes in South Tottenham, which can now be legally extended, and made South Tottenham, now with an eruv around it, increasingly embedded into what is considered Stamford Hill. When I spoke to a non-Haredi journalist who covered the story on a 2022 podcast, he explained that “these guys were the best communicators; it was like, anyone could take a masterclass from them. They knew exactly what the councilmembers wanted to hear, and they were very complimentary.” The ability to mobilize collectively has allowed Haredim to secure political gains.

This unique transactional approach to politics fueled by a community united around key interests can challenge liberal understandings of planning, politics, and state–society relations. In the next section, we will see how not even community social nets and effective relationships can solve the overcrowding issue, leading to a form of *auto-gentrification*, where the community’s younger generation is struggling to find housing.

Non-nuclear families and the unaffordable city

While the core of London’s Haredi community—in part due to the structures outlined in above—has remained in Stamford

Hill, high birthrates, which broadly reflect the global Haredi birthrate of 6.5 children per woman, and a lack of affordable large housing stock are making Stamford Hill unaffordable for young families.

Looking at the spatial patterns of young people in the Haredi community can complicate existing analyses of how young people experience and cause gentrification. As Hochstenbach and Boterman (2018) demonstrate, age and family structure have a large impact on which spaces gentrify and at what rate, while Moos (2016) argues that age is a major factor delineating urban space, noting that the main priority for young people is living outside of their family home. But whereas much of the gentrification literature focusses on young people’s desire to live independently, in the Haredi world the biggest issue is where young people will be able to find housing to start their own families.

Stamford Hill’s Haredi community has one of the highest birth rates in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2013; Staetsky and Boyd, 2015), at least six children per woman (and as high as seven when correcting through community sources) compared with only two children per woman for Jews in general in 2015.

People under 30 in Haredi communities are generally already married with multiple children and need not only a house big enough to accommodate them but also to be within walking distance of kosher shops, synagogues, and other Jewish institutions for them to live an observant life. Indeed, as Sam, a 24-year-old Haredi man with two children, explained, finding a house big enough to raise a family is a significant problem for young people. He and his family currently live in a one-bedroom flat owned by a distant relative. But as his family grows, he is struggling to find a new house to expand; he fears his family being “on top of each other.” Finding houses with two bedrooms is relatively easy, he explained, but finding one

with three or more is almost impossible. Receiving family help is also not easy; he is one of six children and his wife is one of seven. While his parents are financially comfortable, helping each of their children buy a 3+ bedroom house is out of the question.

Large birthrates appear to be having knock-on effects on surrounding neighborhoods. As the cost of living in New York rises, many Haredim are moving out to places like Linden, NJ, and Rockland County. In London, the Haredi population has been expanding up to South Tottenham and Seven Sisters, west into Manor House, and South into Clapton. And since 2016, new communities in West Cliff and Canvey Island in Essex are each home to around 150 families, according to insider estimates. But the out-movement in this case is not direct displacement per se so much as the outmigration of younger families from the overcrowded and less affordable neighborhoods. In Canvey Island and West Cliff much like in New York enclaves like Kiryas Yoel, NY and Lakewood, NJ, Haredim enjoy their version of the suburban dream: a bigger house at a lower cost in an intentionally built “model community.” And at times, they enjoy mixed relationships with the local communities. For instance, the film *Canvey: The Promised Island* (Hall, 2017), covered widely in national newspapers, documents the cultural clashes between incoming Haredi and the local white English residents (O'Connor, 2017). For now, Haredi families in places like Canvey Island and West Cliff enjoy larger houses and a close-knit community, as they start to develop a bustling infrastructure of schools, synagogues, and kosher supermarkets (Canvey Island and West Cliff currently have only one Kosher supermarket each); once that key infrastructure is laid, more families will be incentivized to move in. But in Canvey Island, the community is rapidly expanding beyond its original neighborhood to other parts of the island as new

families move in. Should current trends continue, the community will soon need to find new places to build.

As such, overcrowding in the city has led to a unique problem of *auto-gentrification*, where community birth rates make staying in the neighborhood over multiple generations economically unsustainable. As this case reveals, the Haredi community's culture of having large families is leading to a housing shortage, pushing younger residents to move out. Here, the issue is not necessarily a wealthier or whiter demographic coming in (although the effects of Haredi outmigration on adjoining areas should be explored), but rather the community growing too quickly and the younger generation being unable to afford to stay locally.

Conclusion

It has been over five years since my first encounter with Stamford Hill's Haredi community. What started as personal interest and proceeded as a search for a religious alternative to Zionism has become an academic inquiry into how members of the community negotiate their political, religious, and personal identities in response to the internet, wealth, and a global crisis of leadership.

Drawing on years of ethnographic fieldwork in Stamford Hill, this article shows how the community navigates broader socioeconomic urban change through a set of “non-liberal” cultural, religious, and political practices which set them apart from their neighbors; Haredim negotiate the world around them through practices that secure the interests of insiders, informed by practices tried in similar communities across borders.

To maintain its way of life, the community has developed a robust redistributive welfare net and key institutions to regulate food, dress, and spatial boundaries. At the same time, there are limitations to the

group's ability to resist displacement: through *auto-gentrification*, the community's large birth rates make it particularly vulnerable to London's housing crisis, meaning it is increasingly difficult for young families to own or rent a home big enough for large families. Demographically, the community risks becoming a victim of its own success, as rapid demographic growth is pushing young families out of the neighborhood.

This article has given a survey of the different ways that Haredi Jews shape and are shaped by the city, pointing toward a need to look at the confluence of class, race, and religion/culture in the urban experience. Further research should extend this analysis of non-liberal spatial patterns toward other sectarian urban communities, looking at how specific cultural, religious, racial, and political patterns shape how groups resist and negotiate urban change.

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author, although not Hasidic, is of the Jewish faith.

Notes

1. Haredi, synonymous with "Ultra Orthodox," refers to Jews who practice a strict form of traditional Judaism. Men are usually identified by their black suits and hats and women wear long skirts and cover their hair if married. Within Haredi Judaism, there are three broad groupings: the Haredim; the Litvish, sometimes also called Misnagdish or Yeshivish; and the Sephardi. Furthermore, it is important to note that within Haredi Judaism, there are many "dynasties," also known as "sects"—Satmar, Chabad, Belz, Bobov, Ger, etc.—which follow different cultural practices and spatial patterns, although this article won't address this. However, it is important to briefly note that the Chabad Haredi dynasty follows markedly different spatial patterns, with a spiritual hub in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York but most adherents living outside of Jewish neighborhoods (with many serving as missionaries). For a comprehensive account of the history and geography of Hasidism specifically, see Wodziński (2018).
2. Although there are many similarities in how Haredim across their diaspora navigate urban space, it is important to note a key difference: in Israel, an "ethnocracy" (Yiftachel, 2006; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003) functionally operating as an apartheid regime, Jewish settlement is promoted by the state (Braverman, 2021; Dumper, 1992; Gonen, 2002; Habiballah, 2016). While many Haredi groups (in Israel and abroad) reject Zionism (Inbari, 2010; Tondo and Kirszenbaum, 2024) and are exempt from military service, they are nonetheless privileged by living in a state that promotes Jewish settler-colonialism over non-Jewish settlement. On top of their legal privileging, Haredim's large population has long made them kingmakers in Israeli government coalitions and consequently allowed them to

secure special state funding and to eschew military service (Kampinsky and Sandler, 2019; Kook et al., 1998).

3. A further paper exploring Haredi urbanism in Palestine–Israel might perhaps use this settler-colonialism framing to analyze how Haredim navigate territorial settlement.
4. There are some small Haredi communities in the Southern Hemisphere: Melbourne, Australia, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Johannesburg, South Africa. However, this article focuses on the larger communities in North America and Europe.

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