

Kosher high-tech office lures Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox

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The office in central Jerusalem at first glance resembles many other start-ups—until you notice the religious books and entrepreneurs in traditional black suits.

At Bizmax, a shared workspace, all the entrepreneurs are ultra-Orthodox Jews, a rarity in a community where many men shun work for religious study.

"The high-tech industry is very fit for the haredim," said Yitzik Crombie, using the Hebrew word for the ultra-Orthodox.

Unlike many other sectors, the flexible schedule allows for religious obligations, he added, sporting a black yarmulke and a red beard.

Crombie founded Bizmax two years ago in the city where more than a third of the Jewish population is haredim, which means "God-fearing".

Some 10 percent of Israel's population is ultra-Orthodox.

They observe strict religious law in all aspects of life, from dress to education, food and relations between women and men.

Only 52 percent of ultra-Orthodox men work, according to the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) think tank. Others devote their days to studying the Torah.

Within the Orthodox community the burden of caring for children and providing for the family financially largely falls on women, 73 percent of whom work.

But change is happening slowly.

Crombie says 5,000 ultra-Orthodox, some 1,500 of them men, currently work in high-tech, an industry that has thrived in Israel, the self-proclaimed "start-up nation".

The 35-year-old, a software engineer, at first sought to start his own company.

"When I was looking for partners I found myself lonely," he said.

"The secret source of the start-up nation is an ecosystem. Everyone knows each other" either by meeting socially or through Israel's obligatory military service.

Many ultra-Orthodox men refuse to serve in the army, a position which has long been the subject of divisive debate.

'Create our own culture'

That's how Crombie got his idea for Bizmax, which is financed in part by the Jerusalem Development Authority.

Around 100 entrepreneurs have so far joined the non-profit, which aims not only to be a shared workspace but also a network of shared values to encourage the ultra-Orthodox to start their own businesses.

At the office, the food is kosher, the internet is filtered to block content deemed to be religiously out of bounds and only men can rent a

workspace.

The office is open 24 hours a day, except for on the Sabbath weekly day of rest and Jewish holidays.

Melech Wosk, 43, said he decided to join Bizmax in November because he wanted to be his own boss and no longer live according to the values of others.

In a previous job, "I had to be polite and sit there and do just what they say", he said, adding that among other issues he was uncomfortable with the way women dressed.

"We can create our own culture," said Wosk, who wore the black hat and long beard common among the ultra-Orthodox.

Co-founder of a digital health company for athletes, he considers Bizmax a "safe zone" that helps avoid misunderstandings.

With a fertility rate of nearly seven children per woman compared to 2.4 among other Jewish women, the ultra-Orthodox are projected to make up one-third of Israel's population by 2065, the IDI says.

Their lifestyle, seen by ultra-Orthodox as their religious duty, is also regularly in conflict with the modern world.

Market factors

The growing ultra-Orthodox population has presented Israel with a challenge in how to integrate them into society, but market factors may help push more toward work.

A limited labour force for the high-tech industry means companies

should look for new sources of recruitment among women, Arab Israelis and the ultra-Orthodox, according to a recent NGO report.

Gilad Malach, of the IDI, said the government had invested significantly over the past five years in efforts to integrate the community into the workforce.

But the numbers have levelled off in the past three years, he said, blaming the influence of ultra-Orthodox parties in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition and pressure to maintain social benefits.

"It weakens the motivation to enter the labour market," he said.

Education is also a factor. The ultra-Orthodox attend yeshivas, or religious seminaries, with little focus on maths, science and foreign languages.

Bizmax members have access to conferences, expert networks and English classes.

London next?

Yoni Timsit, wearing a grey vest and black yarmulke, tapped on his laptop while sitting on a chair near the office's entrance.

The 26-year-old started his marketing company after having followed a course distributed through Bizmax on US online giant Amazon.

His only previous professional experience was at a religious association.

"I grew up a lot here with meetings and workshops," he said.

Achim Global, a firm supporting haredim entrepreneurs, partners with

Bizmax and has opened another space with the same concept.

The shared workspace in Bnei Brak, an ultra-Orthodox city near Tel Aviv, is twice the size of the one in Jerusalem.

"We are opening one in Ashdod beginning 2019," on Israel's coast, said Motti Eichler, one of Achim Global's founders. "Our plan is London, New York."

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