

# Bridging the Divide:

## Urban Planning for *Haredim* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



Benzi Rakov leading a tour of a residential construction project for the *haredi* community

*“At Hebrew University, I learned from the finest. My education is enabling me to represent *haredi* interests and culture in the planning and development processes, while bringing the professional language of planning back into the *haredi* community.”*

When Benzi Rakov first became involved in his local planning and building committee back in 2009, he could never have guessed what a turn his life would take. He started as assistant to the chairperson, gathering public comments and tracking the development of 10,000 residential units. Benzi lives in Beit Shemesh, and these were its boon years – growing from a small town into a large city, where today over two-thirds of the population identify as ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*).

Benzi realized he was constantly hearing two languages. One, the language of planners and developers, and the other, the language of the *haredi* community. Benzi decided to get an education. He earned a BA at a small college, and then started an MA in public policy at Hebrew University. When he discovered the urban and regional planning track, he extended his studies by three semesters, becoming the first *haredi* urban planner in Israel.



Benzi began organizing tours, taking anyone who would listen – planners, academics, local authorities – to visit *haredi* neighborhoods and towns to see first-hand what ultra-Orthodox urbanism looks like, for better and for worse. “The *haredi* community is different,” he says. “If the average Israeli family is 3.4 people, *haredi* families range from 5.4 to 7.5 people.” Understanding the differences, including those between different *haredi* sectors, is key to the planning process – from the requisite number of elevators and classrooms to anticipating wear and tear to buildings.

Benzi has seen how bad planning leads to bad outcomes. First, the *haredi* community starts moving into adjacent neighborhoods, resulting in friction with the general population. Second, illegal construction runs rampant, with people building and expanding wherever possible. Considering that the *haredim* will need an additional 200,000 residential units over the next two decades, Benzi believes in a three-pronged approach: existing *haredi* centers must undergo massive urban regeneration, building up rather than out; constructing new *haredi* cities; and parts of new residential projects must be earmarked for *haredim*.

Today, Benzi is a fellow at the non-profit Haredi Institute for Public Affairs, overseeing the field of housing. He is currently working on a position paper disproving the claim that *haredim* are a financial drain upon cities. His research shows that while they pay less into municipal coffers, they also consume fewer services.