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Record yeshiva enrollment predicted to cost economy NIS 5 billion

By [Shahar Ilan](#), Haaretz Correspondent

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Some 63,000 young men are expected to begin studying this week in kollels - yeshivas, or Talmudic academies for married men, the Education Ministry announced Wednesday. The cost of funding this year's studies is estimated at NIS 5 billion.

The figure represents an all-time high in kollel registration, an increase of 4,500 from last year and 67 percent from 10 years ago.

The rise in matriculation comes amid a general increase in employment among ultra-Orthodox men.

The rate paid by the Education Ministry for every student is roughly NIS 720 per month, or NIS 8,640 annually.

In the regular ultra-Orthodox yeshivas, in which most students are at the age that most Jewish Israelis are serving in the military, some 30,000 students were enrolled last year, a figure also expected to climb this year.

The cost of funding study in those institutions is NIS 400 a month, or NIS 4,800 a year.

Altogether, the number of students enrolled in yeshivas and kollels this year is expected to reach a record 95,000, compared with 88,000 last November, according to Amos Zaida of the Education Ministry.

The yeshivas' combined budget this year is NIS 685 million, but Zaida says this figure will have to be raised by NIS 60 million in order to meet the heightened demand.

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The 95,000 students in kollels and yeshivas represent 3.5 percent of working-age men.

Prof. Eran Yashiv, who teaches economics at Tel-Aviv University, said "It's clear we're talking about tremendous losses." He added, however, that if the trend of growing employment among the ultra-Orthodox continues, GDP could fall by NIS 10 billion within a decade.

A 2004 Knesset report found that if members of the community participated in the workforce as do the general population, their contribution would be close to NIS 5 billion.

A 2000 Finance Ministry report produced similar findings, placing the economic damage of ultra-Orthodox men's absence from the workforce and the army at NIS 5 billion.

MK Avraham Ravitz of the United Torah Judaism party rejected the economic estimates. "Billion, schmillion," he said. "It's a numbers game."

Ravitz did not rule out the possibility of reviewing the system for budgeting the Talmudic academies, but expressed skepticism about the results. "I don't trust secular people - you can't do business with them," he said.

The Finance Ministry said Wednesday that "the participation rate of the ultra-Orthodox sector in the workforce has been rising steadily in recent years," a spokesperson said.

"In the framework of the government's social-economic agenda, staff are working on encouraging the employment of men and women in the ultra-Orthodox sector. This will be done while trying to maintain the current trend or even accelerate it. The staff will present its recommendations in the coming weeks."

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