

# SIGNS OF THE COVENANT

The old media of the ultra-Orthodox

By Jamie Levin and Sarah Treleaven

From death notices to cantorial recitals, protests to rabbinic rulings, the *pashkevil*—a paper bulletin or poster—has been a signature form of communication in Jewish ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, communities for centuries. Like the group's distinctive mode of dress, the *pashkevil* originated in medieval Europe. Its name can be traced to Pasquino, a Hellenistic-style statue outside Rome's Palazzo Braschi that was among the first "talking statues"—so called because its plinth was used as a bulletin board for anonymous messages. Observant Jews took up the practice, which spread to the shtetls of Eastern Europe and eventually to neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Jerusalem, where the blocky lettering and dramatic biblical metaphors now stand out starkly. This *pashkevil*, posted by Israel's Ministry of Health in March 2020, urges compliance with COVID-19 regulations in a community that has struggled to keep the virus under control. STOP THE EPIDEMIC! reads one line, above calls to stay home, wash hands, and maintain a two-meter distance from others.

To this day, the *pashkevil* remains an important mode of communication in Haredi communities. Though the ultra-Orthodox don't reject science or technology, their leadership frowns on the use of the internet, television, and other forms of modern media associated with the secular world. Rabbinically approved, browser-free "kosher" phones are widely used, and WhatsApp has recently taken off, to the chagrin of some religious leaders. For mass communication in small, dense neighborhoods, the *pashkevil* continues to be popular because it is "cheap, easy, and effective," says Shayna Weiss, associate director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. The posters can typically be found pasted along sidewalks, outside synagogues and *mikvahs*, or on community bulletin boards. The austere graphic style of this *pashkevil* is characteristic of the form, which Weiss describes as "the visual language" of Haredi neighborhoods. The bold designs also translate well digitally, and *pashkevילים* are now regularly photographed and then disseminated in WhatsApp groups.

Though the Haredi world may appear monolithic from the outside, it is composed of numerous sects, each with its own rabbinic authorities and institutions, and *pashkevילים* have long been a medium for debate. The posters both prescribe and proscribe behavior, and every major issue, both internal and external, is reflected in them. The ease with which they can be produced means that dissenting *pashkevילים* proliferate quickly. Weiss calls them "democratic" and "nonauthoritarian" and notes that they tend toward bombastic rhetoric—the most prominent message in this one roughly translates to BETTER TO BE ALIVE AT HOME THAN AT THE HOUSE OF LIFE. The arguments that play out on these posters, Weiss explains, typically concern "things that threaten the community, that will destroy their way of life." Many of these conversations comment on perceived intrusions by secular forces or potential breaches of a firewall that ultra-Orthodox leaders work exhaustively to protect. In recent years, these disputes have included whether Haredi Jews should be drafted and whether observant women ought to wear wigs.



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Since the beginning of the pandemic, Haredi communities in New York, Montreal, Israel, and elsewhere have consistently had high rates of COVID-19 transmission. The *Times of Israel* reported that in Haifa, where this photograph was taken, the rates had remained low until July, when they began "climbing in a way that wasn't seen before." The pandemic has presented unique challenges to the ultra-Orthodox, for whom large daily gatherings for study, worship, and all manner of life events fulfill religious obligations. "For these communities, their entire lives are social," says Zoë Belk, a postdoctoral researcher with the Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish project at University College London. "They don't get home from work and chill out on the couch; they go to huge weddings. They *daven* [pray] together three times a day in groups." Belk also noted that many Haredi families are poor and live in crowded conditions. Religious leaders have been called upon to convey the risk of the pandemic to their followers, with mixed results, and misinformation and defiance have flourished in some quarters. One particularly dangerous rumor spreading among ultra-Orthodox groups in New York City has been that, because of high infection rates in March and April, the community obtained herd immunity. Weiss has seen *pashkevילים* that blame the novel coronavirus on "a lack of female modesty and other ills." In Borough Park, an ultra-Orthodox section of Brooklyn, one high-profile agitator, the radio host Heshy Tischler, has decried COVID-19 test results as fraudulent and encouraged civil disobedience. He was arrested in October for inciting a riot against public-health restrictions, including the shuttering of synagogues. Jacob Kornbluh, a reporter for *Jewish Insider* who lives in Borough Park, was assaulted by a mob at the scene. He reports having come across *pashkevילים* advising people not to get tested so as to "avoid playing into the hands of city officials." At times, *pashkevילים* have also targeted individuals seen as collaborating with secular authorities. At one point, Kornbluh found his own name printed on a *pashkevil* that called him a traitor.

As with Israel's Ministry of Health, officials around the world have struggled to respond effectively to COVID-19 in ultra-Orthodox communities, often relying on the police to enforce restrictions. Dave Chokshi, who was appointed commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in August, says that the city knew early on that more creative methods would be required to reach these neighborhoods. City officials had conversations with yeshiva leadership, released ads in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian, and deployed sound trucks in Brooklyn and Queens that played recordings advising listeners to wear masks and follow social-distancing guidelines. Christopher Miller, the spokesperson for New York City Health and Hospitals, says that the city has made an effort to hire contact tracers fluent in languages used in the community: eleven Yiddish speakers, seventeen Hebrew speakers, and forty Russian speakers. He notes that many Haredim also speak English, but prefer not to. Conversations about the coronavirus in Borough Park have now largely migrated to WhatsApp—a more modern forum, beyond the reach of city officials. "It's not the same as debates going back, where *pashkevילים* were the only way of spreading information," says Kornbluh. "It's a situation where you're not listening anymore to the experts; whatever you want to hear is what you believe."