

[Sephardic Rabbis in Ashkenazic Garb!!!](#)

Submitted by mdangel1 on Fri, 04/01/2016 - 15:32



A member of the Institute recently sent me an email. Here are his comments, although I've deleted the name of the rabbi to whom he referred. (Rabbi X isn't his real name.)

"Does it bother anyone else that Sephardim have begun wearing the funeral dress of Ashkenazim--the black hats, suits, and other "garb" of Eastern European Jews ? Even Rabbi X, a well-respected Sephardi Hakham, has succumbed to this garbage. I fear for the future of Sephardi customs and traditions !!!"

Well, I confess that this phenomenon has been bothering me for quite a few years. It isn't a new reality, but has been going on for a long time. When I was President of the Rabbinical Council of America (1990-1992), I met with the then Rishon leZion, Rabbi Mordecai Eliyahu, and asked that he encourage Sephardic rabbis not to dress like counterfeit Ashkenazim. The Jewish people need various models of proper rabbis, and the rabbinate should not be squeezed into one particular mold. While Sephardic rabbis don't need to don turbans and kaftans, they could dress as good "Modern Orthodox" and "Religious Zionist" rabbis--in a variety of garbs. The more diversity, the better our ability to attract a wider segment of the population to religious life.

Rabbi Eliyahu responded: the Ashkenazic garb has become the "standard" garb for Talmidei Hakhamim, and Sephardic rabbis won't be taken seriously enough if they don't dress according to this fashion. When I said that the situation might be turned around if he and other Sephardic leaders made an issue of it, he said it wasn't worth it and it wouldn't succeed.

I've spoken to many Sephardic rabbis who come to New York to raise funds for their institutions. I've asked them why they dress like Hareidi/Lithuanian rabbis? Invariably, they answer: this is how rabbis are expected to dress.

In the United States, it has become fashionable--even in so-called Modern Orthodox circles--to show one's piety by donning a black hat, black suit, white shirt--and wearing tsitsith hanging outside. This has crept into the Sephardic community, especially when students have studied in Ashkenazic yeshivot. Even Sephardic rabbis have adopted the "black hat" look, as a way of conforming to and identifying with a more extreme version of Orthodoxy.

This is a distressing tendency, because ultimately it fosters unhealthy values: a) it promotes conformity to external standards; b) it undermines Sephardic, Yemenite and other cultural/religious identity and tradition; c) it negates the rich diversity which is a vital source of strength to Judaism and the Jewish people; d) it sends the message that to be a good religious man, you must dress in a particular fashion, otherwise your religiosity is suspect.

It would be a very positive development if Sephardic rabbis did not take on the look of Ashkenazic/hareidi rabbis. It would be a positive development if Sephardic congregations asked their rabbis not to put themselves into the "black hat" mold. It would be great if Sephardim who send their sons to study in Ashkenazic yeshivot would give their sons the confidence to avoid the pitfalls of conformity.

Is it realistic to expect these things to happen? Rabbi Mordecai Eliyahu thought the battle wasn't worth fighting--or that it was already lost. I have respectfully disagreed with that analysis. The only problem is that reality seems to bear out the truth of Rabbi Eliyahu's position, and the futility of mine. If anyone out there agrees with me (aside from the person who sent the email that prompted this essay), I'd be glad to hear from you.

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