

## Religion or Pseudo Religion: Orthodoxy and Torah Values



Some time ago, I was in an airport waiting to board a flight. A young Orthodox Jewish couple was sitting a few rows in front of me. He was wearing a black kippah, and had tsitsith hanging down the side of his black pants. She was wearing a blond wig, long sleeved blouse, and a long skirt. At some point, she arose and took out a pocket prayer-book. She shuckled quite conspicuously as she mouthed the words of prayer.

As she sat down after completing her prayers, she inadvertently knocked over her bottle of spring water so that it fell down behind her at the feet of a fellow passenger. He kindly picked up the bottle and handed it to the woman. She reached back and took it from him, without looking at him and without a word of thanks or acknowledgement. She kept right on talking with her husband as though nothing had happened, as though the man behind her didn't even exist.

This incident, seemingly so trivial, reflects a serious problem. Sometimes, people look "religious" and seem punctilious about religious rituals--but they lack essential moral values. This young lady was no doubt a practicing Orthodox Jewess; but she lacked simple courtesy and proper manners. She treated another human being--one who had done her a kindness--as though he were not entitled to a word of thanks. She did not realize that proper service to God also entails proper relationships with fellow human beings.

Religious piety without moral values is not religion at all. It is pseudo-religion. It looks like religion on the surface, but is deficient at its inner core.

There are "religious" Jews who self-righteously condemn materialism, but whose very lifestyle is mired in materialism. They support a system that encourages men to study Torah day and night, so that the wives can have the babies, run the household, and provide the income for their families. Such a system encourages yeshiva men to seek wives with rich fathers willing to support their lifestyle. Aside from being grossly unfair to women, this system fosters materialistic values. Brides are evaluated by how much money they can provide. Those from less prosperous families are at a disadvantage. This seemingly "religious" and non-materialistic society is wracked with materialistic values.

We recently learned of a case (hopefully very rare, but still indicative of the problem) where parents of a yeshiva man asked a match-maker to find their son a bride with a wealthy father. They wanted the prospective father-in-law to guarantee enough support to their son, so that he would never have to work a day in his life. After a bit of searching, the match-maker came back with a good candidate. Her father was very rich and willing to establish a generous trust fund to support the family indefinitely. The parents of the yeshiva man, though, asked the match-maker a question: how many siblings does the bride have? The answer: she is one of nine children. The parents rejected the match, saying that the bride had too many siblings and wouldn't receive enough of an

inheritance. She would only get one-ninth of her father's estate. These people consider themselves to be religious Jews; not just plain religious, but highly religious, the elite of the Torah world. Yet, their values are warped.

Should a lifestyle that fosters such a repellent materialism be viewed as being "religious"? It adheres to superficial forms of religion, but is defective at its core. It is, in many ways, pseudo-religion; it is untrue to the ideals and values of Torah at its best.

The Israeli media have been reporting recently about "religious" schools in Israel that promote ethnic and racial discrimination. A number of the elite Ashkenazic hareidi schools apparently have quotas limiting the number of non-Ashkenazic students who can be admitted. A recent story in the Jerusalem Post noted that a girls' school in the town of Immanuel actually has a physical barrier separating Ashkenazic students from their Sephardic classmates. The Sephardim are segregated as much as possible. Another story reported on a "religious" school that isolated its Ethiopian Jewish students, making them use a different entrance to the school building and having them sit in separate classrooms. Is this religious behavior? Can schools that promote such vile discrimination be considered as religious? On the contrary, these schools are repulsive examples of religion gone wrong. No parents--of whatever background--should want their children to attend such schools. Schools that teach and enforce discriminatory policies are morally deficient and cannot be considered as bastions of Torah. Rather, they disgrace the Torah. While passing themselves off as being religious, these schools (and all their administrators, teachers and parents who support the system) are mockeries of Torah religion.

We constantly need to remind ourselves that Torah Judaism is a lofty moral framework for life, that it represents the loftiest ideals and noblest visions. It is based on compassion, empathy, commitment to the dignity of each individual. It teaches service to God and service to our fellow human beings. Without full commitment to these Torah values, "religion" becomes pseudo-religion. Pseudo-religion is false and corrupt at its core, and ultimately undermines and shames true religion.

Each of us can find a way to strengthen the moral fiber of our people. We can be sure that we ourselves conduct ourselves with proper manners, with proper values, with genuine concern for others. We can raise our voices in protest of institutions, schools and "religious" leaders who do not live up to Torah values. We can join with other like-minded people to work for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive and moral community, truly representative of Torah and its teachings.