

Modesty...or a desecration of Torah?

Submitted by mdangel1 on Fri, 06/01/2018 - 00:00

A few years ago, a trusted friend sent me information and photographs relating to a group of hareidi Jews in Bet Shemesh, whose women and girls have begun to wear the Muslim women's garb that covers the entire body, including the head and face. A rabbinic supporter of the group says that these "modest" girls and women are hastening the arrival of the messiah.

Does the Torah require such garb? Does halakha consider such clothing to be mandatory or even desirable for women?

Obviously, the Torah and halakha do not require or condone such clothing. Otherwise, our mothers and grandmothers of all past generations would have dressed like Muslims. They did not. They were wonderfully modest, pious women who dressed in the normal clothing of their societies. They dressed modestly and appropriately--as the Torah and halakha require of all people, men and women.

What new madness has overtaken this extreme group of Jews? Is this just a strange manifestation of extreme behavior, limited to a few misguided individuals? Perhaps.

But perhaps this manifestation is a reflection of something deeper and more insidious in the religious life of the extreme Orthodox, who seem bent on creating ever more stringencies in all areas of halakha, especially in what they think of as "tseniut"--modesty. And these tendencies have infected, to some degree, a growing proportion of the general Orthodox Jewish community.

In the "old days", it was normal within the Orthodox world to have youth groups that included boys and girls. Day schools were often co-ed. Synagogues sponsored events where young men and women could meet and socialize. Men and women sat together at weddings and wedding banquets. Modest, religiously proper behavior was encouraged within a context where males and females could interact in respectful and appropriate ways.

In recent time, though, there has been an increasing tendency to isolate girls and boys, men and women, on the notion that this separation is somehow more "religious" and more "modest". It isn't. It is rather a reflection of a warped understanding of human nature, a belief that men cannot be trusted in any way to interact with or even see women. Men are deemed to be so untrustworthy, that girls and women are to be kept out of men's sight.

Who pays the price for such a warped worldview? Girls and women! Because of men's supposed weaknesses, females are made to wear ridiculous clothes so as to hide themselves from view. Because men and women are deemed to be unable to relate to each other except in a sexually improper way, barriers are made to separate men and women so that they have as few opportunities as possible to speak with each other as fellow human beings. Women are victims of this philosophy--but so are men. It reduces all humans to sexual objects, unable to conduct themselves with propriety, decency and morality. It creates an artificial society that can only be sustained by building ever-more and ever-higher barriers between the genders.

This philosophy is grotesque and abhorrent. Seeing pictures of Jewish girls wearing Muslim clothes draped over their heads and faces is painful. It is a negation of the Torah values which have characterized the Jewish people since antiquity.

We need to recognize that this extreme garb did not just suddenly spring up. It is a result of the

ever-increasing stringencies introduced by hareidi Orthodoxy, and increasingly accepted among the rest of Orthodoxy.

If we do not stand up against these tendencies to isolate the genders, then don't be surprised if these tendencies continue to become entrenched within Orthodoxy. Don't be surprised if more of our girls and women start dressing like Muslim females.

And don't be surprised if ever more Jews become alienated from Orthodoxy, from Torah and halakha. Enforcing false and unnecessary policies of "modesty" does not enhance religion or morality. Rather, it leads directly to a desecration of God's name.

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