The Image and the Reality: Thoughts on Aharei Moth-Kedoshim, May 5, 2012

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Some years ago, the Jerusalem Post published results of a poll of Israelis dealing with attitudes toward Orthodox Jews. Respondents generally identified Orthodox Jews with religious coercion, distinctive clothing, political infighting, and with Hareidim who do not serve in the Israeli military and do not carry their weight in the Israeli economy. Only 19% of respondents identified Orthodox Jews as people committed to Torah and mitzvoth!

Surely, such polls are merely snapshots of how respondents feel at a certain moment. If these same respondents were asked more detailed questions, they might have come up with more positive descriptions of Orthodox Jews. They may have remembered nice, thoughtful Orthodox Jewish neighbors or business associates; or kind Orthodox Jews who helped them when they were in need. There are definitely many wonderful Orthodox Jews in Israel, as well as throughout the world.

Yet, the results of that poll are troubling. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that attitudes toward the Orthodox have worsened considerably over the past few years. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate is associated with extreme and unpopular positions on various issues. The Orthodox religious bureaucracy causes distress to many who wish to convert, marry or divorce. The Hareidi element has become increasingly coercive. The political infighting of the “Religious” Parties is troubling.

If the general public has negative or incomplete views of Orthodoxy, then Orthodoxy itself bears much of the blame. If the popular image of Orthodox Jewry conjures up religious coercion, political manipulation, and self-righteous isolationism, then Orthodoxy is failing in its mission.

This week’s Torah portion reminds us of the commandments to sanctify God’s name and to avoid desecrating God’s name. We are taught to conduct our lives in such a way that we reflect honor on God. Like it or not, each of us is an ambassador of God and Torah. We are responsible not just for living upright and

moral lives, but also for projecting an image of righteousness and kindness to society at large. If only 19% of poll respondents identify Orthodox Jews with Torah and mitzvoth, while 81% identify Orthodox Jews with negative features—we are definitely not fulfilling these mitzvoth properly.

The Talmud (Yoma 86a) quotes the sage, Abayei, who interpreted the verse “And you shall love the Lord your God” to mean that “the Name of Heaven should be beloved because of you.” Our words and deeds should inspire people to come closer to God and Torah, not repel them from God and Torah.

The Talmud continues: “If someone studies Torah and Mishnah, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to persons, what do people then say concerning him? ‘Happy the father who taught him Torah, happy the teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto people who have not studied the Torah; for this one has studied the Torah—look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds!’…But if someone studies Torah and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? ‘Woe unto him who studied the Torah, woe unto his father who taught him Torah; woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah!’ This man studied the Torah—look how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways.”

It seems to be a growing fashion within Orthodoxy to assume more and more stringencies in religious observance. Yet, this religious zeal seems to be confined to details of ritual law without a concomitant zeal for broader moral/ethical laws. The Orthodox world will not draw the masses of Jews to Torah by means of coercion, political infighting, or bureaucratic control. It will not cause the Name of God to be beloved by adopting ever more ritual stringencies and policies of isolationism.

If we are indeed to fulfill the commandments of sanctifying God’s name and avoiding the desecration of God’s name, we will need to adopt great stringencies in these halakhic categories. We will need to be meticulous in our words and deeds so as to ensure that we reflect piety, righteousness, sweetness and compassion. We will need to speak gently and thoughtfully, and to avoid religious coercion at all costs. We will need to show that Torah-observant Jews conduct business, politics, education and everything else with the highest and most rigorous standards of morality.

Until the entire population views Orthodox Jews in a positive light, we are failing in our religious responsibilities. Let us raise a religious voice that sanctifies God’s name. Let us be sure that the grand image of Torah life is reflected in the reality

of how we conduct our lives.

Angel for Shabbat