Religious Authenticity and our "Tribes": Thoughts for Parashat Devarim, July 13, 2013

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By
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A while ago, a member of our Institute sent me an email. Here are his comments, although I've deleted the name of the rabbi to whom he referred.

"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. I fear for the future of Sephardi customs and traditions !!"

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. 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 excellent if Sephardim who send their children to study in Ashkenazic yeshivot and seminaries would give their children 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 his analysis. The only problem is that reality seems to bear out the truth of Rabbi Eliyahu's position, and the futility of mine!

In this week’s Torah portion, we read the admonitions that Moses gave to the Israelites, in anticipation of his nearing death. As in other parashiyot, the people of Israel are referred to as “shevatim,” tribes. The twelve tribes of Israel represented the foundational structure of Israelite society, with each tribe having its own land and its own leaders.

A Kabbalistic teaching informs us that each of the tribes had its own distinctive character, its own unique pathway to God. Although all the Israelites formed one people, yet each tribe maintained its own special insights and traditions. The glory of Israel was that each tribe had its own distinctive contribution to make to the spiritual life of Israel. Instead of a homogenized religious life, the ancient Israelites fostered diversity and individuality.

Each “tribe” of the Jewish people today also has its own distinctive features, its own particular way of relating to God and fellow human beings. We not only have Sephardim and Ashkenazim, but so many subdivisions within these groupings, and so many other Jewish civilizations that constitute the glory of Israel e.g. Babylonian,Yemenite, Persian, Italian, Romaniot etc. Each of these groups has its distinctive traditions and insights, and each plays a role in the overall vitality of Jewish life. However, when there are pressures to homogenize the groups into

one conforming pattern, then the entire Jewish people lose out. Paths to the Almighty are forced shut, and we are constricted to narrower and narrower confines.

Each “tribe” of the Jewish people has a sacred task of maintaining and vitalizing its unique pathway to the Almighty. This is important not from a feeling of “ethnic pride,” so much as from a feeling of responsibility for the overall vitality and spiritual dynamism of the Jewish people as a whole. Religiosity shows itself in many valid and beautiful ways; we need not abandon our distinctive traditions in order to conform to this group or that group.

To abandon one’s distinctive traditions is to become inauthentic. It doesn’t bring us closer to God. To allow valid religious pathways to fade away is to betray the history and traditions of our “tribe” and the history and traditions of all Israel. It is to betray one’s own authenticity.

And that is a terrible thing.

Angel for Shabbat